

The Nature of Christian Freedom

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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This past week, we paused to celebrate our nation's freedom—a right that we have continued to champion for well over two centuries: beginning at the birth of our nation; continuing through and beyond the enslavement of African Americans and of others; continuing on through the age of terrorism both at home and abroad.

We paused to honor the principles upon which this country was established in the Declaration of Independence: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (and women) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

And we have learned through these many years that with freedom comes great responsibility.

Alexander Fraser Tytler was a judge who lived at the end of the eighteenth century, but his book, ***The Decline and Fall of the Athenian Republic*** sends a chilling warning to us today. Tytler found that ancient democracies waned under the selfishness of human hearts. He wrote:

The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been 200 years. These nations have progressed through the following sequence: From bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to dependency; from dependency back to bondage.

It seems to me, if you follow this line of thinking, perhaps the move out of bondage to spiritual faith then the cycle from abundance back into selfishness may have something to do with the human ego. In the movement from bondage to spiritual faith, the ego is in check and aligned with a Higher Being. But in the move from abundance into selfishness and on through the destructive cycle that follows, human beings lost their perspective of gratitude and humility which then leads them eventually back into bondage. This dynamic may occur collectively within a nation, within an individual or both.

The text from Galatians gives us a welcome exhortation: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery." It's the perfect text during this season of the celebration of freedom.

The thesaurus identifies freedom with autonomy, independence, and sovereignty. Some may interpret this as license to “do as I please.” But Paul would not include such a concept in his definition of freedom, at least not as “Christian freedom.”

Paul is speaking to the Gentiles in Galatia. It seems as though the people of faith were being bothered by those who insisted that before a Gentile could become a Christian, he or she first needed to become a Jew. That meant the men had to be circumcised and follow the Torah. As you can imagine, this idea caused quite a stir for people, and so Paul wrote directly to the issue in chapter 5 verses 1-2.

For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again...if you let yourselves be circumcised. Christ will be of no benefit to you.

The question became, how much were the early followers supposed to adhere to the Law of Moses? And yet the church in Galatia needed to hear the message that freedom in Christ is not freedom FROM the law, but a freedom TO something else.

As I read the passage four ideas of freedom become clear:

First, we, living in faith, are given a **Freedom to live beyond our past**. Paul warns the ancient community that freedom doesn't give us free reign for self-indulgence... the idea of ego gone awry. In fact those who live by the Spirit are free to live in a new way, and not enslaved to a whole list of behaviors that bind the human spirit which may include the seven deadly sins and more.

No, we are free, free to live beyond all that, and the Law that would demand payment to atone for such things...here we are promised the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self- control.

We are told through the life of Jesus and the NEW covenant which was created that we are forgiven for things which would keep us alienated from God and others. We are free to live in new ways, to be transformed by the Spirit from habits which have been harmful to ourselves and others. We are free to receive grace, not because we deserve it, but because of God's unconditional love for us.

But having the freedom to live beyond our past requires a second kind of freedom: the **Freedom to choose and to act justly**.

Irishman Edmund Burke, who supported the American colonies as they stood against King George...a stand which would eventually lead to the Revolutionary War, once said this famous quote, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” Similarly Pope John Paul II said, “Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”

Unfortunately, history has shown us that humankind has not always chosen the right path when it comes to doing what we ought to do. Sometimes we even do nothing. That was

certainly true during the Holocaust when countless Christian leaders said nothing as they witnessed Hitler's regime rationalize the centralization of power and then annihilate over 6 million Jews in Europe. Rev. Martin Niemoeller, a Nazi Prison Survivor put it very clearly in his famous statement:

"First they arrested the Communists—but I wasn't not a Communist, so I did nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats—but I was not a Social Democrat, so I did nothing. Then they arrested the trade unionists—and I did nothing because I wasn't one. And then they came for the Jews and the Catholics, but I was neither a Jew nor a Catholic and I did nothing. At last they came for me—and there was no one left to do anything about it."

Our Presbyterians, we have

But our freedom of choice even extends to our perspective and attitude about what happens to us. Viktor Frankel, who also survived the Holocaust said, "Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." That attitude can be as small as giving someone the benefit of the doubt to maintaining a sense of inspiration and hope in extremely difficult situations.

In addition to the freedom to live beyond our past and the freedom to choose, this passage also implies the **Freedom to Love**.

As one theologian puts it, "Freedom in Christ, is not freedom from responsibility or concern for others. Freedom in Christ means having the liberty to enter into a more gracious way of living. Freedom in Christ is about the freedom to love, to live by the law of love," or as Paul says in this morning's scripture, to become slaves to one another out of love for God...and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves."

And with that, when we follow Christ, we are given the **Freedom to serve**. Christian freedom was never intended to be freedom from responsibility to others," as one scholar puts it. "Unlike American freedom, Christian freedom is not about personal liberty; Christian freedom comes with an undeniable sense of obligation and servitude, and complete submission to God and to Christ Jesus."

Max Gabrielson told me last week that in the Septuagint, the Latin translation of the scriptures, *to be of service* means *to be a slave to another*. Think about that.

Maybe hearing the word *submission or enslavement* makes you bristle. It does me a bit. They are certainly not concepts that many welcome in this day and area of the country. But just as in other instances in the scriptures, submitting oneself in humility **voluntarily** to the will of God is powerful beyond measure.

I saw a video this week which illustrates this principle perfectly. A group of tween boys were outside playing basketball on a court in the driveway. The houses were packed closely together. They were obviously enjoying themselves, and the game was competitive.

The ball escaped the hands on one of the players and rolled down the driveway, so one of the boys went to get it. As he picked it up, he looked next door, and on the porch was another boy who was in a wheelchair. They exchanged a look which was full of a variety of emotions. One can only imagine.

A few scenes later, the boy in the wheelchair looks outside and a basketball is sitting on his front porch. He picks it up and wheels his way back to the boys, hoping to return it to them.

As he rolls around into the backyard of his neighbor with the ball in hand, he sees the group of 6 boys, seated on chairs, chairs with wheels, rolling around, and playing basketball. Of course he is delighted and joins into the game. Submission. Powerful. Healing. Community-building.

Following the living Christ gives us: Freedom to live beyond our past; Freedom to choose; Freedom to love; and the Freedom to serve. What amazing love, what incredible gifts! May we go and live in that kind of freedom.