

First Trinity Lutheran
Galatians 5:1-25
July 1, 2007

“Yearned to Breathe Free”

With the Fourth of July and another celebration of our nation’s birthday just a few days away I thought it appropriate to follow the lead from Galatians Chapter 5 and talk about freedom. From the beginning to time freedom has been a major subject of discussion. From our American history Patrick Henry speaking at the Virginia Convention in 1775 said this, "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death." Hear a statement from the Declaration of Independence adopted in Philadelphia on July 4th, 1776. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights-that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When the Continental Congress declared the separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain 231 years ago, liberty was foremost in the minds of our nation's founders. This notion of freedom did not start with them, nor does it end with them. In every age and across the earth, human beings have, as the inscription of the Statue of Liberty reads, yearned to "breathe free."

Three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Hebrew people suffered under bondage in Egypt. They yearned for freedom. God sent a man named Moses who demanded of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" When Pharaoh refused, God delivered them. A thousand years later, the people were again oppressed; both by the tyranny of the Roman Empire and by the powers and principalities of the world, and God sent a man named Jesus. Jesus announced in his first sermon that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives. . .to let the oppressed go free." This same liberating Jesus would later say to his closest followers, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . .so if the Son

makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Freedom. Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. In the beginning, when God created humankind, God could have made us puppets, so that whenever God wanted us to do something, God would just pull a string and we would do it. What kind of relationship would that be? God created us, women and men, with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the Living God.

In the New Testament there are more than fifty references to freedom. Each of them exploring a different dimension of what Paul calls in his letter to the Romans, "the glorious liberty of the children of God." In Paul's letter to the Galatians, however, there is a less than glorious atmosphere surrounding the subject. The church in Galatia was divided. There were those who believed that freedom meant license to do whatever you pleased. During the time of Jesus and Paul and the Gnostics said that setting the human spirit free from matter and flesh is the whole point of life and that what you actually do is of little consequence, so do what you please. In response, Paul replied, "Do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves of one another, for the whole law is summed up in this single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Another group in the church in Galatia was made up of those who thought it imperative to adhere to the requirements of religious ritual follow the rules and laws. This group would say that freedom in Christ is all well and good, but that they felt much more secure remaining inside the old prison of a thousand do's and don'ts. Paul was passionately convinced that observing the ritual or not observing it really was of no consequence. According to Paul, "The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

I went to elementary school at Mount Olive Lutheran School in Milwaukee. It was a private Lutheran school operated by the church that my parents were members of. Each morning before classes began the school bell would ring promptly at 9:00AM and we would stand at the side of our desks, place our right hand over our heart, and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. We learned early on in our social study and civic classes that civil liberty is a function of being faithful to justice. As it was for my generation and so it was for many generations before me and for each new generation of Americans that come after we must learn that liberty is a function of being faithful to justice. So to each generation of Jesus' followers must learn anew that Christian liberty is a function of being faithful to the law of love.

Here Jesus is not speaking of love in a romantic way but of love when he voiced the great commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, he was emphasizing ethics over emotion. The great 20th-century religious thinker Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: "Basically love means being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and toward the universe of humankind."

To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of "me, myself, and I". To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self and to give oneself to service. To be free is to be free **for** responsibility, not **from** responsibility. I think of how Christ Jesus who had everything in the world going for himself—power, status, safety—how he chose, freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for the sake of the world. Now that is freedom. We get a glimpse that Jesus fully understood what his mission in life was when we read the first verse of Luke 9:51 where it says, "He set his face to go to Jerusalem."

Think of how God made us as one human family, irrevocably bound to one another in God's heart and mind from the very beginning so that we are by nature inclined toward one another. The need of the other is really our own need. The suffering of the other is, in a real

sense, our own suffering. Today we know that millions of people suffer, certainly and mostly it is the poor. But also there are mass killings of whole populations of people. I looked up genocide and found that over 30 some groups have experience genocide since the world began. Many of them I had never heard of and I wrote just a few of the ones that I new to be common, Ukraine, Iraq, Bosnia, Jews, Kurdish, Mongal, Soviet, Assyria, Irish, Cambodia, Guatemala, Rwanda, and our most current one Darfur.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner has this little test that he used to see if someone was still a functioning free moral agent. Beuchner wrote: If you have not cried for someone other than yourself in the last year, then the chances are you are already dead. That's a good place to start, having feelings of empathy for the other. But I know I haven't passed the test until I actually do something-make a call, bake a pie, write a letter, offer comfort, stand up for someone whose voice is not being heard. How did Paul put it? The only thing that matters is faith working in love. It is by God creative design and through the power of the Holy Spirit that freedom and responsibility belong together in our lives and in the life of our faith communities.

The same is true, I believe, for our nation. One of America's greatest gifts to the world is the notion of religious liberty. The state cannot impose religion, and all our citizens are free to exercise religion or not, according to their own wishes. But that does not mean that people of faith do not have a crucial role to play in the life of our nation. We ought to be working every day to create a society that is marked by concern for the common good. We ought to be listening and advocating for the voices of those who are not being heard. We ought to be speaking out against excessive self-indulgence and naming the corrosive consequences of greed. Paul put it so plainly in this regard, "if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."

Some politicians of our day believe that the United States has a calling to spread democracy in the world. I believe that the United States has a different calling-that we are called to be a servant people, bringing good news to the oppressed, modeling justice, proclaiming liberty to the captives. Can you even think of a time that called for moral leadership more than these troubled days? Oh, what an opportunity we have, what a responsibility we have-to repair, to raise up, to build up, to offer hope for all those who mourn in our midst and beyond our shores.

Jesus says in our Gospel today, No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God. What kind of harsh statement is this? And exclusive, too. How about unrealistic? Undoable? Ridiculous? I read this and asked myself , "Then, who is ever fit for the Kingdom of God?" But take a closer look at this text: instead of an "either/or," Jesus is really positing a "both/and." Notice that both of the poor souls that ask to go take care of other business are exclusive in their request as well. "Sure, I will follow you Lord, but first, let me go bury my father." And then another, "well sure I'll follow you Lord, would love to, but first let me go tell them good bye at home; I mean they are expecting me for dinner; it would be rude to just not show up!" In our society we are even more likely to hear something like this. "Yes, Lord, I will follow, I will pray, I will give, I will work, I will whatever, BUT FIRST, I need to pay off my car loan; I need to find a job; I need to get my taxes done; I need to get the clothes washed. It is the "But First" that seems to be key here.

What if the response to Jesus was something like this. "I will follow you AND I will go bury my father." "I will follow you AND I will go and tell those I love at home where I am going. In some ways we should expect no other response from Jesus. He says loud and clear to wish to follow him: "Hey, you can't compartmentalize following me, you can't do it when you get time, when you clear some space on your Palm Pilot, after the clothes are washed, after the

grocery shopping is done as the house is cleaned. This is a way of life, which means yes, the clothes must get washed, and the bills must get paid, and the kids must get fed, and the taxes must get paid, and you most likely have to keep those appointments in your Palm Pilot.”

“AND, follow me anyway; follow me while doing those things; follow me in a way that makes you do those things in a new way. Follow me forever: no ‘BUT FIRSTs;’ no ‘insteads;’ rather both and.

It's not about what you are doing or not doing; it is instead about what and who you are being. It is about what we finally put our hope and trust in everyday, and all days. Following Jesus is 24/7, it doesn't mean not doing everything else, it means doing everything else with your face set toward Jerusalem, with your heart invested in God, through the power and witness of Jesus Christ.

The spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, 2,000 years ago, taught humanity a lesson it has never learned but has never quite forgotten: that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.

Sisters and brothers may our pledge of allegiance be this day to that kind of kingdom we pray for at least every week. Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven.

Amen