

“For Freedom”
Galatians 5:1, 13-26

A sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material from Discipleship Ministries, UMC

This weekend we celebrate a national holiday, probably the biggest national holiday of them all. Independence Day, the Fourth of July. Most of us will spend the weekend with family and friends—properly socially distanced this year, where appropriate.

- We'll have barbecues, and outdoor games, and maybe spend some time at the beach or in the mountains.
- We'll watch fireworks. They may not be as big and as loud as previous years, but fireworks and the Fourth go together like nothing else.

And maybe, if we stop to think about it for a few minutes, we'll remember what the day is all about: celebrating our independence as a nation.

When we do pause to think about this, I hope we will remember, and give thanks, for the rights and freedoms won for us by our forebearers. Remember their sacrifices this weekend, for it remains true that “freedom isn't free.” Thanks to them, we enjoy more personal freedoms than any other nation on the planet. We should give especial thanks for the freedom to worship God as we choose. That's a freedom we exercise each week when we gather together, either in person or online. The freedoms we enjoy are “the blessings of liberty” guaranteed to us as citizens of the United States of America. They are enshrined in our Constitution and must be carefully guarded each and every generation.

The Bible speaks of freedom too. Look, for instance, at the Hebrew Bible—our Old Testament. We find there Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt by God. That tells us our God is a liberating God, the One who sets the captives free.

In the New Testament, Jesus came to set humankind free from slavery to sin and death. So, freedom is a Christian concept. Independence, though, not so much. Not if independence means we're on our own, because we're not.

- Our faith tells us, for instance, that we cannot do life alone. Left to ourselves, we will go astray.
- Our faith tells us we need a Savior. We cannot save ourselves.
- And, our faith tells us we need other people...companions for our journey of faith, who, along with the Holy Spirit, help us to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

But freedom is something we can claim and proclaim.

The Apostle Paul begins the fifth chapter of his letter to the Galatians with the word freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free.” For freedom. What does Paul mean here? For Paul, freedom isn't just a gift God handed over to us; it is a responsibility. You see, the question isn't a matter of “Are you free?” or “How free are you?” For Paul, the question is, “What are you going to do with your freedom?” What will we choose to do with the freedom Christ gives us?

Paul knows what gifts from Christ or the Holy Spirit are all about.

- A true gift of the Spirit isn't for you. It isn't about making the one who received it better or more holy.

- A true gift is given to build up the community of faith.

That's the test of a spiritual gift: Is the whole body of Christ blessed by this gift? If it makes the recipient somehow better but doesn't help anyone else, it really isn't a gift from God. God's gifts are to be shared and to be used for others.

So then, the gift of freedom is to be used to serve other people. To what extent?

According to Paul, we are to become slaves to one another. That sounds like the opposite of freedom, doesn't it? This is something that grows out of the law, which Paul summed up in verse 14: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now before you say it, no, he hasn't forgotten the other part about loving God, first and foremost. He is dealing here with a people who think freedom means they can go their own way and not mind their brothers and sisters in the faith. The continuing battle we fight, day by day and week by week, is not the war for independence, but the battle against the self. In this conflict, we are behind enemy lines. The entire culture around us is a culture devoted to self. Every day, we are told to think first about ourselves. One look at the commercials on TV or radio tells us this is so.

But the Holy Spirit nudges us to think about who we are, whose we are, and how we can serve others. Paul used the language of flesh and spirit to describe this conflict.

- Now, don't take this to mean we should be ashamed of the flesh, of the bodies God has given us. God pronounced these bodies "good" when God created humankind.
- It also doesn't mean that any attempt to find pleasure or satisfaction in our bodies or in the world must be a negative thing. There have been movements within Christianity that sought to do this, to say the material world is evil and only the spirit is good. That's not the way we understand the gift of human life. Human life comes in the spirit and the flesh—a whole human being.
- Saying the flesh is evil and spirit good is what led to the idea that Christians can't have any fun, that we cannot have joy; that all we can do is go around looking glum, shaking our heads in judgment at the mistakes of others, and ourselves.

But the opposite is true. Paul claims that it's the self-centered life that leads to drudgery, gloominess, isolation, and brokenness.

Let's compare the lists Paul provided in this text, beginning with what he calls "the works of the flesh:

"...fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, faction, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these" (Galatians 5:19-21).

That's some list! Think about each of these things for a moment and you'll realize they are all about pleasing the self at the expense of other people. They are selfish behaviors. All of these words divide, or they take, or they abuse some aspect of what it means to be human. This is what Paul means when he talks about the pleasures of the flesh. They are the actions, behaviors, and attitudes that push people away, that separate self from others. These are words of individualism. They scream: "It's all about me."

Now contrast this with the other list Paul provides, the one referred to as the fruits of the Spirit:

“...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

These words are about interdependence and caring. They are about building up the community of faith and the world around us. This way of living is full of joy, full of all kinds of pleasures. The key difference is these are pleasures that are shared; they are enjoyed in community and by community. At the end of the second list of characteristics, the fruit of the Spirit, Paul says: “There is no law against such things.” Thank God for that!

And that brings us back to freedom—it’s still our choice what we do with the freedom God has given us.

A leading early church theologian and Bishop of Carthage, St. Augustine, supposedly summed up the law by saying: “Love God and do as you please.”

That sounds like dangerous advice, especially the “do as you please” part.

But remember that the first part of the law, as Jesus summarized it, is to “love God.” That means if you truly love God and seek to do what pleases Him, “do as you please” means you’ll strive to please the one you love. If you love God, then you will do what pleases God, which includes loving your neighbor. This is the freedom Paul celebrates in his letter to the Galatians.

This could be the freedom we celebrate as we enjoy Independence Day this year.

- We have the freedom to care for other people;
- The freedom to see all people as equals in the sight of the law and the eyes of God.
- We have the freedom to serve not because we ***have to*** but because we ***get to***;
- Not because we have a duty to fulfill, but a love to put into action.

We are free not to live independently of one another and care only for ourselves; we are free to recognize our **interdependence** and how our own personal good results from the good done for us by many others. If we “Love God and do as we please,” then we will contribute to the common good by loving our neighbors too.

In the name of Jesus.

Amen.