

Spiritual Freedom©

Galatians 5:1, 13-18

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Once again, we are approaching the big celebration of the 4th of July! Already, there have been explosions going off around our home.

Growing up, we would have over night celebrations for the 4th of July. Friends and family would gather the day before and set up tents and campers at my parent's cabin. There would be blueberry pancakes early in the morning, and lots of food and swimming and games, and lots and lots of laughter and fun.

Then on the night of the 4th, we would gather on blankets on the ground and watch as some of the adults set off what we called "night works." There were lots of "oooooh's and ahhh's and Woooows as the rinky dink fireworks went off one by one. They were not that much to see, but we sure had fun just being there together ... with our expectations.

After I was married and lived away, I missed my family more on the 4th of July than I did at Christmas and Thanksgiving.

All of it, of course, is a celebration of Independence Day – July 4th – the time when we remember the signing of the Declaration of Independence. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian clergyman, was among those who signed.

We remember the part that says, "All men are created equal." We look back at our history, at the fierce fighting that our ancestors did, for the sake of our freedom and we are grateful, even as we are thankful and supportive of the many troops who are risking their lives today, for the sake of freedom.

And while our worship is a place to worship God and not our flag or our country, I think most of us would say we do love our country and the freedom the flag stands for. We rarely have the opportunity any more to stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance so on this Sunday before the celebration of Independence Day I would like to invite you to do just that.

Please stand, and think carefully of the words you are saying:

I pledge Allegiance to the flag
of the United States of America
and to the Republic for which it stands,
one nation under God, indivisible,
with Liberty and Justice for all.

Our flag stands for freedom. It says we are one nation – “under God” – and that we are indivisible (which I am not sure we actually have been. Certainly we have been divided over many issues. Certainly we were divided in the Civil War and in the 60’s with race riots. Certainly we are divided over gay rights and abortion rights and we continue to struggle with race and immigrant issues as well.)

Yet, we are still one nation and our men and women continue to make sacrifices to *one* nation – the United States of America.

And we claim that we stand for liberty and justice for all people. But we know that there are still women enslaved by men; children held bondage in homes that are abusive; people of color who struggle with equal rights; ... the list goes on and the issues go on. Liberty and justice for all are still the things we strive for as a free people, even today.

So what is the difference between our freedom as a country and the freedom Paul is writing about to the church in Galatia? Paul says that Christ has set us free, yet we are not to use our freedom to do whatever we want and to destroy it.

I certainly think that is similar, don’t you? We live in a free country, but we have rules and laws to follow. Imagine what freedom would look like if we did not have any regulations!

Here Paul is talking about the law and how Christians are free *from* the law. How could that be? Wouldn’t being lawless mean chaos and doing whatever you wanted?

The whole context of Paul’s letter is written as a response to some confusion. Some Jewish Christians were trying to persuade others that to be a Christian they still had to follow all the thousand do’s and don’ts of the Jewish law – which included circumcision.

On the other side of the spectrum were some Gentile Christians whose philosophy was that anything goes. The flesh and the spirit are separate. We will be rid of the flesh eventually, so it doesn’t matter what the flesh does. You are free to do what you want.

Paul is insisting that neither of these would be real freedom. To be free in Christ means that in Christ’s death and resurrection, we are set free from the bonds of sin and death. We once were slaves to sin, and really, no practice of the law could save us from that slavery.

When Christians say we are saved, it means the same thing as being free. No longer do we have barriers from having a close relationship with our Creator because of sin. No longer is death the final word in life. In Christ, we have freedom from death in our eternal life.

The Law of Moses (with all the many rules that were made up by humans to keep that law) was certainly given by God and was good. They are the Ten Commandments. There is nothing wrong with them, right?

It's just that no one ever kept every one of them perfectly and even thousands of rules and practices, including circumcision, or sacrificing animals or grain as a sin offering – none of those things ever really worked.

Paul insists that the freedom we have from the slavery of sin and death is pure grace given by God in Jesus Christ – and not by any thing that any one of us could do. Our freedom was costly to the One who gave it to us.

But, although this freedom is being free *from* something – (sin and death, slavery to the rules of law) – it is also freedom *for* something. It is a freedom for responsibility as a follower ... a lover of Christ and his ways.

Paul goes on to list the ways of the flesh. This is how Peterson translates it in the Message:

“It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion;

Paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community.”

And he says, *“I could go on.”*

Instead Paul says the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He writes that when we are truly free in our spirit; *“We develop willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.*

We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.”

Of course, we learned them as the Fruits of the Spirit that are ... what? ... “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Paul says there is no law against such things.

Just as we have responsibility in our freedom as a citizen of the United States, Paul is saying we have responsibility in our spiritual freedom as a Christ follower.

Christ Jesus does not make the law invalid. He once said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5)

He also said that the greatest commandments were to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22)

And Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, "Now faith, hope, and love abide ... but the greatest of these is love."

I think that real love – love that is genuinely a fruit that grows from our faith and relationship with God – is the most visible sign of our freedom. When we love, first God and then others, we are more prone to keeping all the other commandments (the law) that God gave Moses.

And as a citizen of these United States of America, I would say that genuine love of God and neighbor would go a long, long way in helping us to live up to the pledge we make to be indivisible and to stand for liberty and justice for all.

What do we do as a congregation that truly shows the fruits of the Spirit? How are we living into our spiritual freedom? How do we live the disciple's life that continues the mission of the one sent by God who said in his inaugural statement:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free." (Luke 4:18)

May our lives reflect the responsible freedom we have been given in Jesus Christ, the one who came to set us free!

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