

Our Predicament

When I read the text from Galatians 5, although I know the context of Paul's letter, it seems to me to directly bridge the gap to a major issue of our current culture. It seems to me to describe what I am terming "our predicament." A major issue of our time which comes from what we as a society have come to misunderstand about this fundamental right which Paul has told the Galatians has been given to them through Christ. A predicament implies a complicated, perplexing situation from which it is difficult to disentangle oneself. The culture around us has given us a definition of this word freedom which according to the document whose signing we will celebrate on Thursday, is a God given right, does not seem to be the biblical definition. That is why when we celebrate our freedom, it has become something of a predicament. According to the definition, a predicament is a situation which involves a dilemma necessitating a choice, a choice which according to the dictionary is difficult, unpleasant, embarrassing, or nowadays, sometimes comical. So our predicament is which understanding of freedom do we choose. Looking at the Galatians passage, we are no longer concerned with the issue which Paul first addresses—Christianity has long been separated from its roots in the Jewish traditions which were being urged upon those gentiles entering into the community of Christ's followers. At first this community was primarily composed of those raised in the Jewish faith. Paul, like Jesus, like Peter and those first disciples was Jewish. They were raised in all the historic rituals and traditions which were the hallmarks of that faith. But the statement which Paul makes resonates with our modern day predicament because of the same intrinsic concept—freedom. In anticipation of Independence Day this coming week, this time when we celebrate the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence it seems that we might need to re-visit just what this historic declaration strove to achieve and how it is now being interpreted. Galatians 5, I think, although written over two thousand years ago and in a context about different parameters, still has something crucial to say about this concept of being free. Galatians 5:1 reads—For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." To Paul, the good news of Christ was that liberating message that it was not the rituals of the faith which established the relationship with God, but it was the following of the covenant laws about loving God and living in community. Long before Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers of the United States, the descendents of Abraham in Egypt were oppressed. God heard and sent Moses to free them from slavery, and then gave them the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Torah set out ways of living together in community, in relationship with their God and with each other. A thousand years later, God intervened again in the person of Jesus who announced in his first declaration of ministry that he had been anointed "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive, and to let the oppressed go free." Jesus will tell his disciples, "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." So Paul, has ample grounds for stating that Christ has set those who follow him free. Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. In the beginning, when God created humankind, God created us with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. Note that: We are created with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. When Paul proclaims to his gentile audience he was bringing them the good news: that message of God's love, that message of freedom from the

bondage to the status of this world as proclaimed by Rome, freedom to hope for a life eternal based on the promise of God and none of that depended upon conforming to the rituals practiced within the Jewish tradition. I am sure that the Apostle Paul felt like what he proclaiming was clear. But it seems from this letter that what was happening in that community he had left behind in Galatia had created a predicament. The community was being presented with a choice of paths to follow; that of the traditional rituals of the community they were joining or to a path where freedom meant nothing beyond self. At least that is how I would describe the effect that it was having on the community he left behind. Paul seems concerned about behaviors which seemed to be the result both from the message—the good news that Paul had brought about freedom—and the restrictions which some tried to place upon it. So Paul writes to them affirming that Christ has indeed set them free from the requirements of the traditions, but tells them in verse 13: “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” Paul warns them that those who see this “freedom” as a license to do as they please have also got it wrong. He adds in verse 14: “for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Paul reminds the Galatians what those who follow Jesus always have to learn: Christian liberty is a function of fidelity to the law of love which Jesus said would be how those who were his disciples would be known. This is not love in the sense of romance, but love in the sense in which Jesus used it. 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, not emotion. He was stating priorities. Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: “Basically love means...begin responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind.” To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of ego—of being able to move beyond self—where “me, myself, and I” are not the center, where they do not rule our actions. To be free is to be FOR responsibility not from responsibility. In other words, all those behaviors Paul names as behaviors which come from desires of the flesh are those based or rooted in the self. Those behaviors named as fruits of the Spirit, come from being freed from the bondage of placing self first...the orientation is toward another, and yet those are the ones which are most desirable for self as well as other. As I mentioned when I began, I think we have some of the same confusion today about what freedom means. In our culture today, it seems we think freedom means “I can do whatever I want, whenever I want to.” We confuse freedom with “license.” License means you don’t care about anybody else, so you have no qualms about doing whatever you want, regardless of how it affects others. It’s a matter of indulging yourself however and whenever you please. But what that misses is that there are always consequences to our actions and choices. Pure self-indulgence never results in real freedom. In our gospel passage from Luke the narrative reaches a crucial turning point. Luke 9: 51 tells us “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This is about the mid-point of the narrative. Jesus has now gathered the disciples and will now begin preparing them to be sent out into the word, preparing them to be apostles. This passage is a collection of some seemingly random interactions. Jesus’ messengers are refused entry into a Samaritan village, two disciples wish to punish that village, but Jesus rebukes them for this anger and moves on. As they move on, prospective disciples come up, and Jesus’ responses are that varied but not unqualified encouragement. To one, he points out that he is essentially

homeless. To the next two, he issues the invitation but will not allow delay; not to go bury a parent or to say farewell. These are often discussed so as to reduce the harshness of their impact, but what they are about is this setting of priorities. Jesus is setting out for Jerusalem and what will occur. Jesus is setting out to set us free from the burden of our sin; not to set us free from our responsibility to the covenant relationship which God established and desires. We are fortunate in the nation in which we live and there are many things about our country to celebrate. As we celebrate Independence Day, let us keep in mind that there are two ways to define freedom. When we celebrate our freedom, let us remember who really sets us free; let us remember that we have been set free not for ourselves but to serve and worship; let us remember just where our priorities really belong and strive to live accordingly. We have been set free by Christ. Let us live as those who belong to him. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.