

Having Freedom

Freedom is something that gets talked about a great deal this time of the year—as the 4th of July approaches—as around us we prepare for Independence Day celebrations. It's hard to miss the more frequent displays of the American flag outside homes and on all the advertisements that appear announcing sales for the occasion. Freedom is a concept which appears to us on many levels—we all want to be free to make our choices—our declaration of Independence—especially in the opening words proclaim that certain freedoms are the inalienable rights given by God to all men. Unfortunately, that ideal was written by a select group of men who managed to ignore that many of them owned other men; and women were not even given a mention. In our culture today there are many voices claiming their right to be free to make choices, but often there is no mention of a concept that comes along with freedom—the idea of responsibility. There are many places in scripture where freedom is a concept that is fundamental—after all the descendants of Abraham who followed Moses into the desert did so seeking freedom from Egyptian slavery. On their way through the desert, actually near the beginning of the 40 year journey, they made a covenant with God which was formalized into a code of behavior. This code of behavior we know as the Ten Commandments given to them by God which would allow them to live together in community peaceably. The focus of many of these commandments was to establish the responsibility to do no harm to another. Although not part of the original Ten Words, later in scripture we find Jesus summing all of them up in two: Love God; love neighbor. The scripture reading today from Paul's letter to the Galatians is a dissertation on freedom and how human beings react to having it. It opens with this statement: "For freedom, Christ has set us free." The lectionary reading officially skips some of the text, verses 2-12 to be precise. Paul is no longer with this group of believers having left to carry the good news to other areas. In his absence some in the community are listening to a variation on the message Paul brought to them. This variation is that those within the group who were not from the Jewish tradition need to adopt and obey some of those traditions: specifically circumcision and the dietary habits. Paul is very upset about this which has occasioned the writing of this letter. That accounts for the second portion of the first verse: "stand firm, therefore and do not submit to a yoke of slavery." Since Paul was Jewish and never felt that he was anything other than a Jew; this might seem a little confusing at first glance. Why did Paul seem to say that getting circumcised and following the Mosaic Law was submitting to a yoke and likened it so slavery? The reason is the same one that made the Pharisees subject to criticism from Jesus in his encounters with them. Reliance on performing rituals and obeying strictures was how they measured righteousness not in how they treated one another. If you can declare yourself righteous by following rules, then there was no reason for Jesus to come and dwell among us to teach us what God thinks is important about our behavior toward one another; especially there was no need for him to die for us if by checking off the appropriate boxes we could redeem ourselves. Seeking justification through obedience to the law removes the recognition for our need of God's grace. Disciples of Christ should lead lives that seeking justification according to Paul "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Paul then begins to describe what it means to live in the freedom that Christ gives because the freedom that Paul describes seem to give it a different meaning than the one many want to believe. Paul was likely aware that his emphasis on freedom could be viewed and is dangerous without the understanding that it is based in how Christ calls his disciples to live. Without the qualifications added by being a Christ follower the concept of total freedom can lead to libertinism—to wide spread self-indulgence. Galatians 5:13-14 sums up his description of this freedom Christ has given them: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom for an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Paul’s understanding of the freedom given by God’s grace through Christ is that it releases us from the power of sin, with its self-serving desires and motives. This “self” is never satisfied, it seems, never has enough esteem, status, wealth, pleasure, or whatever else it is seeking. Thus self-indulgence easily becomes a new form of slavery. Christ frees us not only from the law, but from that sinful self. Then we are free to serve the neighbor, to become “slaves to one another” through love. To serve “through love” means that any actions or service done is not to meet the demands of the law or even to feel good about ourselves. There is no list or box of items to be checked off in order to gain a gold stare. It is not done for any form of self gain, but it is completely focused on the needs of the other, the neighbor. When scripture tells us that all of the Law is summed up the word meaning summed up could just as easily be translated as fulfilled. Thus Jesus and Paul viewed the Leviticus text as fulfilling the intent of the entire law so that “loving the neighbor” becomes fulfilling all that the law and prophets have told us. Paul goes on to explain that the sinful self, the self-indulgent actions are in direct opposition to the desires of the Spirit. When Paul describes the “desires of the flesh” he includes more than those of indulging bodily desires although those are included. When you look at his list you will see that eight of them have to do with divisiveness within the community: enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy. These are less tangible than those usually associated with “desires of the flesh”. But they are every bit as destructive as the more salacious ones. By contrast, the “fruit of the Spirit” is love; love and all the qualities that flow from it. These Paul lists as “joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” There is no law against these things and Paul tells us that it the Spirit, not the Law which produces this kind of fruit; the fruit which more than fulfills what the law requires. Verse 25: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” The word Paul uses for this guiding is *stoichomen*, which is a military term indicating standing in formation or marching in line. In other words, if we say we are led by the Spirit, then we need to keep in step with the Spirit and what the Spirit desires from us. Within Paul’s understanding of freedom there is a radically different understanding of freedom than is common. The freedom Christ gives is not freedom for self-indulgence, but freedom from self for service to others. It is the freedom in which life in community flourishes. It is freedom which gives self-control. Paul’s understanding of the love which produces this is known as agape, which is the love represented by Jesus’ cross and the love he gives to all. The verbs Paul uses when describing those walking in the Spirit are in present tense. These verbs used to talk about both behaviors suggest on going practices. Verse 21 refers to “those who continue to practice such things.” Paul is aware that human community and human life take “practice” over time,

requiring learning and starting again. It is to that life of on-going learning, practice and beginning again that he calls believers. It matters deeply how believers live into a world they perceive as belonging to God rather than to any of the “gods” which the self may have given allegiance. In Paul’s day those “gods” had names which we associate with various idols, like Baal; or those of Greek mythology. But the Roman Caesars also claimed to be gods. In our culture we have other “gods” which claim and desire total allegiance from the “self” who indulges itself—wealth, status, power. There are many who follow these “gods” proclaiming “self” to be more important—proclaiming their freedom to “indulge” no matter the cost to others. The God who came to dwell among us has revealed a commitment and love no other “god” will ever have for us. That concept of a commitment to human beings by any god’s of Paul’s time was a radical change. For us, it is a deeply held conviction and understanding that the God we worship loves us as no other can. This also means God is a particular God with particular qualities who has particular expectations and understandings. Paul’s type of freedom does not create the culture we have become. Paul proclaims this freedom with a passive voice of having been chosen by an implied agent—God. This freedom is a call into freedom that in some ways mirrors God’s own, that is a freedom dedicated to serving other in love. Our culture promotes a different vision; a vision of “me, myself, and I.” We are told that you have to beware giving too much of yourself away; we consider “love” as a type of holy grail to be obtained to fulfill ourselves; we think that freedom means we can do whatever we want, whenever we want, we believe our rights take precedence over all even those things that cause harm to others. In the Luke passage for today we read that Jesus has freely made a commitment to God’s plan of redemption and healing for the world: he has set his fact to Jerusalem and what awaits him there. In the text there are three small encounters of Jesus who ask to join and follow him. Jesus’ responses seem rude and uncaring on the surface but they are reminders that truly following Jesus is not always going to be easy; that keeping your focus on what God desires is important, not allowing other things have more importance that following the guidance of the Spirit about how we live our lives. The ability to love others as we are loved by God is not one that is easily obtained, and a constant challenge for us in our internal battle with the sinful self who wants to put its own interests first. Practice and especially practicing in a community with this same understanding of the freedom grace gives us helps. I saw a church sign this week that caught my attention. It read: God desires the whole week, not just week end visitation. That points to the meaning of this passage from Galatians and so many more. What God desires for us is our living into this concept with all that we say and do; every day of our lives, not just Sunday morning. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.