

Sermon for July 3, 2016 Independence Day "Called to Freedom?"

Galatians 5:1, 13-26

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men 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."(The Declaration of Independence)

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."(The Constitution of the United States of America)

"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." (Pledge of Allegiance)

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"(The New Colossus)

These are all calls to freedom. These words represent the ideals that the United States was founded on. The last of these is especially close to my heart. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." It is part of the poem "The New Colossus" that is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty. To me it represents the call to freedom sent out by our nation to the world.

It was a call that my ancestors answered. On my father's side both my grandparents came to America from Scotland in the early part of the 20th century. They both sought a new life of freedom and opportunity. They both came through New York harbor and were greeted by the Statue of Liberty. They both were processed through Ellis Island with millions of other immigrants.

They were part of the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. They heard and answered the call to freedom. My grandfather valued education highly, but was forced to quit school at 13 and go work in the mines. His son not only completed high school in America, but went on to college. And his grandson was free to seek even further education to take up a vocation as a preacher. To me that is what America is all about: answering a call to freedom.

Our passage in Galatians is also a call to freedom, but of another sort. Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another."(5:13) Paul was facing people who wanted to enslave the new Gentile Christians to Jewish laws. In a sense, Paul's letter declares independence from that law. He proclaims that we have been set free from the tyranny of trying to make ourselves righteous. It is not we who make ourselves righteous, but God through Christ who graciously forgives and cleanse us.

The problem is that some deliberately misinterpreted this freedom from the law as a license to sin. But Paul makes it clear that it is not a freedom to sin, rather it is freedom from sin. Through Jesus' blood we are made righteous and are free to act righteously. So we should not use our freedom as an opportunity to act unrighteously.

He sums this new freedom up ironically in the term "servant," or "slave." We should use this freedom to serve others. We have been set free; not to think of our own wants and desires. We have been set free from selfishness so that we can truly love our neighbor. Before Christ we were lost in our selfishness, but now we are free to participate in God's love for all people through our service.

Having described the basic concept of Christian freedom from sin and to serve, Paul gets more specific. We have been set free from the desires of the flesh. These are: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like." All of these are based on a love of the self over a love of the neighbor. Fulfilling these desires entails sacrificing the neighbor in order to satisfy the self. They all involve loving things and using people. In Christ we have been called to freedom from these things.

Conversely we have been set free to enjoy the fruits of the Spirit. These are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. All of these are only truly experienced when we sacrifice ourselves for others. We only truly know love and joy when we give to another. In contrast to the desires of the flesh fulfilling the fruits of the Spirit involve loving people and using things. This is freedom to become more than we were. It is freedom to imitate the goodness of God and participate in the Almighty's love.

Paul goes on: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." We have abandoned that old allegiance to serve the self and pledged our allegiance to serve God and our neighbor. As Christians we have declared our independence from sin and have devoted ourselves to righteousness. We have cast off the chains of selfishness and are free to serve others as Christ served us.

True freedom is in knowing God. The truth is that we were all born in sin. Yes, we were created equal and equally we all have fallen short of the glory of God. As children of God by creation we all have been offered freedom from sin through Jesus Christ. For it is only through the selfless love of God and self-sacrifice that we can truly know joy and happiness.

Declare your independence from sin. Ordain and establish your personal constitution to seek justice and tranquility, to defend the poor and help the needy, to know the fruits of the Spirit. Pledge your allegiance to the cross of Christ and the one who suffered and died on it. And by that allegiance know the true peace and joy that servanthood can give.

Today we are called to freedom! Since this country was founded, millions have heard and responded to the call to political freedom. And the huddled masses of the world yearning to breathe free have come to these shores. Today I call you to spiritual freedom: to cast off the chains of the desires of the flesh, to know the liberty of servanthood. Jesus lived out that love by giving his body to be broken and his blood to be shed to set us free. This meal we share today ritually presents that sacrifice. Today God calls us all, at this table, to accept Christ and his will for our lives so that we can truly love our neighbor.