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Deuteronomy 6:20-25

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

FAITH AND FREEDOM

On Thursday, with a bit of a breeze, the flags were not flagging in showing their colors, the fireworks were working in showing theirs as well. It was a time to celebrate something accomplished long ago. In response to King George III, colonists boldly demanded to be free to govern themselves, free to live and prosper. I know our celebration on the fourth of July focuses on the beginning of what would lead to the United States, but it is also a day that has inspired more than the people who live within our shores. There is a governing philosophy, even a theology, espoused in the Declaration of Independence, written not far from here, that all people are created to be free. Obviously, the colonies that would become states did not live up to that great ideal from the start. Even the author of the document did not live up to his ideals. But Thomas Jefferson's words have inspired many to aspire to live with a measure of freedom.

However, seventeen centuries before Jefferson's words, there was an epistle addressed to early Christian communities in the Galatia region of Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. The Apostle Paul authored this epistle in part to help them understand the gift of freedom as being among the reasons for which they were created. They were a part of the Roman Empire, which was not the most freedom-loving world power. The American colonies in 1776 were a part of the British Empire, which also used its power in ways to benefit itself, rather than those over whom it reigned. So, the Second Continental Congress adopted Jefferson's declaration. But Paul's idea of freedom went beyond just the political realm. He pointed the Galatians to the source of freedom, the One who had not stayed away from the political realm in freeing their spiritual forbears from slavery in Egypt, the One who also came in the person of Jesus to free them from the oppressive forces of sin as well as the overly-strict, even oppressive observances of the Hebrew law. The Galatians had encountered challenges from within and beyond their communities of faith. They had reasons for despair and heartache that could snatch

away any experience of freedom. But Paul told them that in Christ, they had been set free. By God's love and grace, they were freed from all that could hold them captive. He wrote, "For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

On this weekend after the holiday, we give thanks for our political freedom, which came and has been protected at a significant cost. Another part of our freedom-loving identity, acknowledges that as a part of God's people, we have been delivered from that which would keep us from being free. God freed our spiritual forebears from the drudgery of slavery in Egypt and in this land. By God's grace, we also are lovingly liberated from the figurative prisons built by those who don't believe in grace, who say that salvation can only be earned through strict obedience to a long list of rules and laws. By God's grace, we are also lovingly liberated from the prison of 'me, myself, and I.' Death and despair also no longer have the grip on us they once did because of the total giving and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We celebrate these experiences of freedom that can transcend any experiences of oppression and restriction.

But as stewards of the freedom of which we have been given, we need to recognize that it has limits. I remember a time at the beach with four generations of extended family. When we first arrived, the red flags were up, which meant that conditions were such that the lifeguards determined it was not safe to go swimming very far out into the ocean. Those who are familiar with riptides know how powerful the undertow can be. But one of the youngest of our extended family proclaimed that since the lifeguards got off work at 6 p.m., we would then be free to swim as far out in the ocean as we wanted. It was an opportunity for a parent to explain to the child why they would not be using their freedom to do that.

For those who love jazz, the improvisation that comes with that music form might appear to be wholly free, unfettered, and unstructured. But there are structures of genre, musical key, form, and tune that place constraints upon those who are playing jazz together. While improvisation is virtually inexhaustible, it is not a matter of 'anything goes.'¹

The freedom we experience through Christ gives us great latitude, but not a mindset of anything goes. Paul says to those who follow Christ, “You are called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another.” Indeed, the liberation we come to know in Jesus Christ calls us to a specific way of living. We are not just free from something; we have been set free for something.

We are a people freed to live with a purpose and a task. Freedom is not license. Our freedom is not to be used for obsessive self-indulgence. Rather, it is for living out a loving relationship with God and neighbors. Our freedom is not for consuming and wasting all the resources we care to, or for fouling creation for others. Rather, our freedom is to be used for sharing God’s good gifts in wise and responsible ways. The freedom we are given in Christ is not so that we can force our uncaring desires on others; our freedom is for working cooperatively for the peaceful and just reign of God in the world.

No longer bound by egocentric desires, we can seek to live selflessly for others. We don’t have full power to live like that on our own, but God’s Spirit empowers us to live fruitful lives in relation to others, lives that are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, and kind, lives that show generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Wouldn’t it be great if we were free to live in those ways? By God’s grace, we are! We are free not simply to be at liberty, but we are free to be more freely loving; and if we are more freely loving, we will be a people who seek a more just and supportive society in which people, to use Paul’s words, no longer “bite and devour one another.” No longer held captive to oppression or in prison to our own selfish desires, we are freed to work for hope and life and freedom for all people everywhere. When we are really free, our life with God and for God, in freedom, in service, is the most fulfilling way to live out who we are. In the waters of baptism, we have been claimed to join in God’s joyful work of sharing hope, peace, love, justice and care!

When we love someone, and we see that they have a need that we can help to meet, then we live out our greatest freedom in ministry to that one we love, inspired by the One who first loved us. This is a time to celebrate and live into something

accomplished long ago. We do so by living in ways that show that God's love has liberated us and wants to liberate everyone else to fully be who they were created to be. I am thankful for the Declaration of Independence, and for the founding of this nation to which it led. I am thankful for the truths that Jefferson believed to be self-evident. But we seek to follow the Apostle Paul's declaration of dependence - dependence upon God's loving Spirit to experience our true colors, which include the greatest freedom we could ever know as a gift from the true Author of liberation. Thanks be unto God. Amen.

¹ Based on an idea shared in Miloslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun's book, For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference, Brazos Press, 2019, pp. 109-110.