

“A Different Kind of Freedom”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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I get most of my news from the Internet, and many of the web sites I read allow readers to submit their own comments on the news stories. I sometimes choose to read these “reader comments,” and I am often *sorry* that I have. The comments are cruel, rude, or otherwise unpleasant. People use the anonymity of the Internet to spew their unveiled hatred --and they see the ability to do so as a personal *freedom*.

This is just one example of how modern Americans have twisted the concept of “freedom” into something our founders never had in mind. We use “freedom” as an excuse to do *whatever* we want, *whenever* we want, and if someone tries to stop us we hold up the Constitution and say that “our freedoms are being taken away.” We use “freedom” and the “Constitution” loosely, forgetting why our nation’s founders came up with those concepts in the first place, and forgetting *true* challenges to that freedom, like the many years in which our African American brothers and sisters were enslaved -- by authors of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, no less; the destruction of our American Indian brothers and sisters -- by people who touted “the great frontier”; and the internment of our Japanese brothers of sisters -- even while our military fought for “freedom” overseas.

Freedom today has more to do with hedonism than anything else. It has become a mindless term we fling whenever we are not getting what we want.

In our Epistle reading this morning the Apostle Paul *also* speaks of freedom, but the freedom of which he speaks is neither hedonistic nor nationalistic. Indeed, Paul’s idea of freedom was all about *breaking down barriers* between Jews and Gentiles. Paul sought liberation from a legal system that created a bondage to the law. In the words of Dr. Rodney S. Sadler, Jr., “The forms of bondage from which Paul sought to escape were ethnically sensitive and prescribed certain restrictions and benefits for some (Jews) while opposing no obligation on others (Gentiles).”¹

¹ Sadler, Jr., Rodney S., “Alternative Freedom: Galatians 5:1-26,” *The Christian Century*, June 12, 2007, accessed via <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3422> on 07-02-10.

Paul was completely and utterly committed to freedom. Sounds like music to our modern American ears, doesn't it? But before you jump up and drape an American flag around Paul's shoulders, hear this.

Paul spoke of freedom from religious law, *not* just because that law was burdensome, but because the law was ineffective in establishing right relationship with God. He wanted freedom from the burdens of sin and death and freedom from ethnic boundaries.

Paul did not just want freedom *from*, however. He also spoke of the freedom *for* fellowship and service. Paul's hope was that Christian freedom would allow us to serve one another, free *from* sin and free *for* kindness and peaceful living. Paul's idea of Christian freedom was never intended to be freedom from responsibility to others. Quite the opposite, in fact. While Christians would be free from the bondage of religious law, we would be free *to* fulfill the law of Christ, by taking on one another's burdens -- by truly loving.

We haven't quite gotten there yet, have we? Paul spoke of breaking down ethnic boundaries. Instead, people around the world continue to build walls around themselves based on ethnicity, skin color, culture, citizenship. Paul spoke of freedom from legal bondage. Instead, we make "laws" about how people are supposed to behave, and if they break those "laws," we revile them. Paul spoke about freedom *from* sin. Instead, we think "freedom" means that we can treat one another however we please, no matter how cruel. Paul spoke about freedom *for* service. Instead, we think "freedom" means that we don't have to do anything we don't feel like doing.

As you celebrate Independence Day today, think not only about American freedom, individual liberties, and national pride. Think about the freedom that we have as Christians to treat one another with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Think about the freedom from sin that Jesus Christ gives us. Think about the freedom for true unity.

Paul spoke about freedom two thousand years ago, but we still struggle to attain it. As you celebrate the many freedoms that we *do* have, think of the ways in which you can work toward freedom in Christ. Think of the fruits of the Spirit that God has given you, and how you can use those "fruits" to reach toward more peaceful and just world.

Freedom is, indeed, a great thing to celebrate. But remember that fireworks and flags are not symbolic of the greatest freedom we can know. To find *that* freedom, you must look to the cross.

Now let us pray.