

Spiritual Independence Galatians 5:1, 13-25
June 30th, 2013 Pentecost 6 C Pastor Rob Zeratsky

So...the Fourth of July is this week, of course. It's always a little awkward when it lands in the middle of the week like that isn't it? I mean, do you try to stretch it into a four-day weekend? Just take the day off? Take the whole week off? Celebrate it on Saturday? Lots of options and none of them seem like the best. But no matter how you do it, it's at least a time to set back and reflect for a few minutes on how blessed we are as a nation to have the independence we have. The freedom to say what's on our mind and to live and worship as we see fit. It's a day to reflect on our freedom...and...you know...blow a few things up.

But in all seriousness, freedom is what it's all about, isn't it? Of course, most of us have been born and raised in America, we've never really lived under another type of government, so we don't have a great point of reference to try to compare our freedom against. That can lead to us both undervaluing the freedom we do enjoy, and even simultaneously, thinking we're more at liberty than we really are. So let's just contemplate for a moment and ask...how free are you? Can you really go where you want and do whatever you'd like?

In a sense, yes, but for many options the consequences are too severe to make them serious options. There's a lot of choices that would land us in jail or with serious fines, so we can't really do those. Okay, but even forgetting the illegal ones, there's still a lot you can't do because of the cost involved...either monetarily or otherwise. To do something you want would mean not getting done something you ought to. We get buried under so many responsibilities that we don't really have any time to choose to do anything with. And what's worse, is many times those responsibilities are self-inflicted! We wanted a nicer house or better car or a new kitchen and on and on because we want to feel like we're "getting ahead" in life, but then we have to spend so much time paying for those things or maintaining them that it hardly seems like we're enjoying them and the question becomes, who really owns whom? Do you own your things...or are you a slave to them? But a person keeps trying to get ahead, because that's what you're supposed to do, right? That's what the point of life is, isn't it?

Now, for many people, the lack of freedom goes even further. This doesn't necessarily apply to us, but we do know the feeling. Let me explain. Even beyond being trapped in a lifestyle like I just described, there's the constant feeling of being incomplete. That something's still missing. And that hole is caused by the guilt of the conscience. No matter how many worldly things you indulge in, it's never appeased. No matter how much you struggle to do better, you still haven't done enough. There's an almost certain feeling that you're going to have to answer for your mistakes someday. You may not even know who it is you're going to have to answer to, but it's there. And perhaps you end up trapped in a guilty pattern of self-recrimination and self-loathing that you end up taking out on others. At worst you convince yourself that nothing's really wrong and you learn to drown out that small voice and ignore it.

But neither of these are our fate. Why? Because we have been set free from this slavery. We have learned the truth about the slavery we live in and the truth about our God that we are accountable to. We've learned that no amount of "getting ahead" in this life makes a difference, that none of it will last and that none of it affects the outcome on the other side. We've learned that no amount of our well-intentioned effort makes a difference either. As our conscience tells us, we have not measured up and we cannot correct that situation. And so God himself, though we have given him no reason to, has come and set us free. He died in our place, bore the punishment we deserved from our God and in doing so set us free from the slavery of this life. We're released from the need to work to please God. God loves us and has forgiven us through his own actions, not ours. Nothing we do makes him love us more or less. Our eternal destination is assured in him, he will take us home to be with him. We are free from the nagging worries of this life that we won't measure up. And that frees us in a lot of other ways too. It frees us from the pressures to need to do or accomplish or get things while we're here. It frees us to be happy going without because we recognize that our greatest reward is coming and when it does, there will be no regrets about what we didn't get while we were here. In Christ, we are truly free.

It is to this state of mind, this presence of true gospel freedom, that Paul addresses this section to the Galatian Christians that we read this week: <read text: Galatians 5:1,13-25>.

The question for us becomes, what do we do with the freedom we have been given? In fact, what does this freedom really mean? To understand it properly is a great release for the Christian, and leads to all manner of blessings and joys. To misunderstand it is to not only allow hurt and tragedy into one's life, it is risking a return to the eternal death we were originally subject to. It can be a complicated issue, especially given how much Paul wrote about Christian freedom throughout his letters, but it's also obviously that much more important that we understand it properly.

It's maybe better to begin by discussing what this freedom *isn't* as Paul shows here. He tells us first not to let ourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. That may seem like a "duh" statement, but then he goes on to describe how that could happen so that we recognize it! Clearly, we're not going to enter slavery on purpose, but we can't avoid it if we don't understand properly how it happens. His next statement, in verse 13, illuminates things for us some. We are called to be free, but not a freedom that indulges the sinful nature (or literally here; "the flesh").

Because if we're not careful, that is what we end up doing with our freedom. Or perhaps more accurately, that's what we think freedom in Christ means. We misinterpret it to think that freedom means we can *do what we want*. Think about it. When someone tells you that you're free to do as you like, what are the options that first jump into your mind? What you *want*. What you want to do. I mean, I remember for myself what it was like to be left home alone the first couple times and was free to do whatever I wanted. It was like, "yeah, I'm going to stay up late and watch stuff loud and pizza and candy and chips and drink as much soda as I want...I'm going to totally indulge." (And I'm just going to pretend I've gotten over that these days.) It's in our nature to be selfishly short sighted whenever we have the chance to be self-determining. Eventually (hopefully), we learn that acting like that leads to consequences later, and we stop.

It's in our nature to want to act the same with the freedom Christ has won for us. Paul warns us not to use this freedom to indulge the sinful nature, and as always the defining characteristic of the sinful nature is selfishness. To indulge the self with the freedom Christ won is to not be free at all. It's returning to the yoke of slavery we were under before. It's returning to the life of sin that we couldn't stop. And in doing so we only ever end up hurting ourselves and others. But this isn't just a hurt like a stomachache the day after eating a whole gallon of ice cream, this is the kind of hurt that could really kill. Look at Paul's list about the acts of the sinful nature, and then how he concludes the section. **"Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."** Now, do notice how he carefully puts this. It's not those that fall into in weakness. It's those who persistently live life like this. Those who choose to indulge the sinful nature in this way will not have eternal life. But wait, I thought what we did was forgiven? I thought that there wasn't punishment for sin? How can this be true then?

The flaw lies in the logic used to justify that kind of behavior. The sinful nature wants to reason thus, "Oh the law has been met, huh? Sins future and past paid for? So I'm free to do as I want now, right?" Ah, but that last question is the problem. Freedom in Christ is freedom from the sinful nature. It is a new self created in us that wants the same things that God wants. And the defining characteristic of the new self is the opposite of the sinful nature. The new self exists in self/ess love. The new self would not even ask the question, "I am free to do as I want now, right?" Because the new self cares more about God and others first. And only the new self inherits eternal life. To act in perpetual selfishness, to indulge the sinful nature is to smother and eventually kill off the new self and therefore forfeit your claim on the kingdom of God.

But the freedom guided by the Spirit in the new self is so much more and so much more fulfilling than whatever we could do by shamelessly gratifying our base desires. It's a freedom from sin, a freedom from the need to sin, and in that then a freedom from the damage and guilt that sin can cause in our lives. The new self follows God as its pattern, the God that loved us who were unlovable, the God that gave everything to rescue us. The new self follows the pattern that God always meant for us to have, and in doing so, the fruits of the Spirit are poured out on us. The more we follow the way of the Spirit, the better we understand what that means by learning from the Spirit in the word of God, the more we have each day the fruits described here: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I would rather have any one of those any day of my life than any of the short thrills and regrets that indulging the sinful nature can create.

You have been set free by God. Though we give thanks for the freedom we enjoy as a nation, no earthly power can compete with and no earthly force can take away the freedom we really enjoy through the Spirit of God. We are not tied to this life. We are not chained to our sins. God have made us right with himself and by that, we are free from the worst of everything. Let happen whatever may happen in this life, be content with whatever you have and however much you do. You have been given an eternal rest that will not be taken from you. You are truly free. Understand what it means to be free in Christ, and live that freedom in the fruit of the Spirit every day. Amen.