

Pentecost 7C (7/3/2016)

Isaiah 66:10-14

Psalm 66:1-9

Galatians 6:1-16

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Even as we celebrate freedom, we also recognize its abuses. Christian freedom is not the equivalent of personal license, but can only be exercised in relationship. Grounded in God's gracious action toward us, freedom is "faith active in love." We exercise true freedom, in other words, when we "bear one another's burdens," and so fulfill Christ's expectations for human community.

"My country, 'tis of thee, / Sweet land of liberty, / Of thee I sing; / Land where my fathers died, / Land of the pilgrims' pride, / From ev'ry mountainside / Let freedom ring!"¹ I'll never forget belting out that verse as I sat with seminary friends to watch the United States men's national soccer team face off with powerhouse, England, during the 2010 World Cup. There were English fans at the venue, too, by the way, and the match ended in a draw.

Let freedom ring. Tomorrow, we celebrate the United States' independence from Great Britain – freedom from taxation without representation, freedom from the shackles of imperial control – so our July 4th celebrations emerge from a specific historical context. But, over the years our notion of freedom has expanded. American freedom today has a wide variety of applications, from the right to free speech to the opportunity to shop on Thanksgiving Day to the availability of deep-fried you-name-it at the state fair. Freedom has come to mean that I can do what I want to do when I want to do it.

¹ Samuel Francis Smith.

Consider the following example. There are 225 units in our apartment complex, so parking is at a premium. Recently, I've noticed a vehicle parked repeatedly in a space designated for people with disabilities. It's an extended pick-up truck with a raised carriage and oversize wheels. It's parked diagonally, partially blocking the driveway. And, as you may have guessed, the driver has yet to display a placard indicating that he has the right to park there.

Call me a cynic, but this smacks of entitlement. *Parking spots are hard to come by, the logic goes, and anyway, I almost never see a person with a disability in need of a space, so I'm going to park here.* It's the same logic that informs any careless exercise of freedom. And, even as I shake my head at my neighbor with the pick-up truck, all I have to do is look in a mirror to discover the log in my own eye – my own desire to have my needs and wants met even at the expense of others. So, even as we celebrate freedom, we also recognize its abuses.

"For freedom Christ has set us free," we heard in last week's reading from Galatians, "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another."² *Do not submit to slavery, but become slaves to one another.* These verses form the basis for a Christian understanding of freedom, very different from the conventional understanding.

Martin Luther was enamored with Paul's letter to the Galatians,³ and thus deeply committed to the notion of Christian freedom. He wrote his timeless *Treatise on Christian Liberty, or The Freedom of a Christian*, in 1520, 250 years before the

² Galatians 5:1, 13.

³ See Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 183.

American colonies rose up in defiance of Britain. In quintessentially Lutheran fashion, he introduces his discourse with a paradox: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁴ From these seemingly contradictory statements, Luther elaborates on what Paul sets out in Galatians, namely that faith is not only the gift of God’s grace, but also the source of human freedom, or what Luther calls “lordship.” **Complete freedom from the power of sin and death makes the Christian nothing less than a “fellow-king” and “fellow-priest” with Christ.**

In no way, however, does this lordship allow for self-gratification or personal gain. In fact, Christian freedom is diametrically opposed to self-centeredness. For Luther, self-centeredness is at the heart of sin. Human nature is corrupted by a state of being *incurvatus in se*, Latin for “curved in on the self.” But **the grace of God liberates us from self-centeredness, and turns us outward instead.**

It follows that true freedom can only be exercised in relationship. If faith characterizes our relationship to God, then love characterizes our relationship to each other: “I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor,” Luther writes, “just as Christ offered himself to me.”⁵ **Real freedom, in other words, is *faith active in love*.**⁶

It’s a compelling response to the prevailing notion of freedom. Freedom is not the equivalent of personal license, but rather unreserved attentiveness to our neighbors. **Freedom calls us out of captivity to our own interests and into self-**

⁴ John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, 53.

⁵ Ibid. 75.

⁶ See Galatians 5:6.

giving love. So, in our second reading for today, Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians with an appeal: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

The Deans gave me permission to share the story of a burden their family bore a number of years ago, a burden you bore with them. While Dennis was undergoing stem cell treatment in Seattle, several members of this congregation exemplified faith active in love. “Angels appeared,” Diane told me, as she remembered the lengths to which you went to care for them in that particularly difficult season. Jenny Moore attended to Dennis’ care for a time while Diane could not, accompanying him to his appointments and making sure he received his medication. That’s an exercise of Christian freedom, of shedding the inhibitions that keep us apart and sharing responsibility for our collective well-being.

Dear church, **Christ gives himself completely for us, withholding nothing. So, we give thanks to God, *and* we give ourselves for one another. This is the essence of the “new creation” that God brings about in the cross and resurrection, that the followers of Christ die to ourselves and become the power of resurrection for others.** So, as you celebrate your freedom this 4th of July and in years to come, take Paul’s words to heart: “let us not grow weary in doing what is right... [but] whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all....”