

Freedom to Love

When we hear the words freedom or liberty in early July in the United States, it's easy to get caught up in patriotic feeling and pride. This is, after all, as Abraham Lincoln proclaimed at Gettysburg, a nation "conceived in liberty." As I mentioned last week, the founding document of our nation, the Declaration of Independence, bases its argument on the God-given rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And the organizing document of the former British colonies' second attempt at forming a unified government, the Constitution of the United States, opens by affirming that the purpose of "We, the people," in ordaining and establishing this new form of government is, in part, to "secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." Almost since its ratification, that Constitution has been amended to codify the protection of certain key civil liberties or to extend freedoms enjoyed by one class of people to additional classes. These have included freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, of assembly and petition, the abolition of slavery and the attendant right of former slaves to vote, the right of women to vote, the right of 18-year-olds to vote, and a host of other rights and guarantees. We do indeed live in "the Land of the Free," even if our application of those freedoms is sometimes incomplete, inexact, or inappropriate.

By the same token, freedom and liberty are powerful words in the Baptist Tradition, both here and around the world. The religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has long been a hallmark of Baptist belief. Indeed it was Baptists like Isaac Backus and John Leland who campaigned tirelessly for the inclusion of freedom of religion in the laws of the new country. Our historic commitment to religious freedom springs from three other basic tenets of the Baptist Movement – you may recall that in the book we studied in Adult Sunday School a few months ago, Baptist historian Walter Shurden refers to these and religious freedom collectively as the "Four Fragile Freedoms." In addition to Religious Freedom, they are Church Freedom, Bible Freedom, and Soul Freedom. As religious freedom means that each individual has the right to practice their religion or lack thereof according to the dictates of their conscience, without the interference of the state, so church freedom means that each gathered group of believers has the right to practice according to the traditions in which they collectively find the movement of the Holy Spirit and to join in association with such like-minded groups as they choose for the extension of ministry. Logically, church freedom derives from Bible freedom, the right of each believer to read and interpret the Scriptures according to his or her understanding with the guidance of the Spirit and within the context of their community of faith. Bible freedom, in turn, can be seen to spring from soul freedom, the concept that each individual is free and competent to forge their own relationship with God, without the mediation of another human being, group or creed.

But as precious as freedom is to us, as Americans and as Baptists, we know that untempered freedom can lead to negative consequences. Freedom of speech left completely unchecked could allow a mischief-maker to cry "Fire" in a crowded theatre. One congregation exercising church liberty may set a policy that causes another, exercising that same freedom, to withdraw fellowship and destroy long-standing relationships. We humans are not always careful about how we practice our freedoms. The Genesis story of Adam and Eve and how they extended their freedom to eat anything in the Garden to include the one thing forbidden to them can be seen as a cautionary tale in this regard.

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Perhaps it was their own awareness of the need for limits on freedom that led the Galatians to consider the teachings of those we refer to as the Judaizers: that party of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who insisted that the newly converted Gentiles must add total allegiance to the Jewish Law to their allegiance to the Jewish Messiah. As we have seen in the preceding four weeks, Paul has warned them strongly against adopting such a practice. But in what we know as chapter five of his letter to the churches in Galatia that he himself had founded, Paul turns to a new argument. They are not to give up their new spiritual freedom for bondage to a legal system, no matter how venerated. Instead, they are to follow the Spirit as it leads them in the free path of love for one another.

We can be relatively sure that unchecked freedom was an issue for the Christians of Galatia. Historical evidence certainly tells us that moral living during this era of the Roman Empire was rare. Indeed, one of the reasons that the dispersed Jews of this time were so respected in the Græco-Roman world was that they lived highly moral lives, setting an example to which some of their neighbors aspired but that few reached. We also have the evidence of Paul's own writing that prior to their conversion the Galatians had led lives that reflect a still all-too common level of behavior. After he gives his list of vices to be avoided in verses 19-21 of this chapter, he adds, "I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." The apostle must have preached in these same cities against the lifestyle that likely typified their experience.

The Judaizers would have offered the comfort of sure answers for daily living, probably using a rabbinic figure of speech of the Law as the yoke that would allow them to live and work in step with each other. But Paul turns the image around, calling to mind the practice of the Roman armies of leading captives in triumphal parades yoked together like cattle. Those yoked prisoners had lost their freedoms forever – they were destined for the slave market. Paul has already reminded the Galatians, in chapter four which we have not read together, that they were formerly enslaved to that which is not God — "weak and beggarly elementary spirits," he calls them. We might think of superstition, custom or destructive cultural norms. But, he wrote, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman," to redeem them from slavery and make them adopted children of God. "Stand firm, therefore," Paul writes, "and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

But if they do not have the sure and simple dictates of the Law to keep them from misusing their new-found freedom, the Galatians may have wondered, what would prevent them from drifting back into the deathly lifestyle that they had sought to escape in the first place, the very habits that Paul had already apparently warned them to break? In a verse in chapter five omitted from this morning's lectionary, Paul provides the key to this question: "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Perhaps you've heard a sermon or lesson or two over the years about the different words in Greek for love and Paul's use of them. Most common in Greek are φιλεω, the love between siblings or friends, from which William Penn derived the name of his city Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, and ερως, sexual or erotic love. The word Paul habitually uses is αγαπη, and as its exemplar he holds up Jesus and the love for all people that caused him, as he wrote the

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Philippians, to “empt(y) himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” It is a self-giving love, a love that, as Elisabeth Johnson writes in her commentary on this passage, “is an all-encompassing way of life, constantly seeking to serve the neighbor.”

It is this self-giving love for the neighbor that Paul holds up as the safeguard between liberty and libertinism. Echoing the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew that “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,” Paul calls on the Galatians not to be enslaved by the Law but instead to willingly become slaves to each other, putting the needs of the others above the desires of the self. Paul also partially echoes Jesus by saying, “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”” Some of you may remember that the writers of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, quote Jesus as saying that this commandment was second to loving God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength. I think a good explanation of Paul’s omission of that first commandment was made by the Anglican scholar Reginald Fuller in his article on this passage. “Paul does not overlook the first and greatest commandment—the love of God,” Fuller wrote. “He is speaking to those who have already heard the message of justification, and who have therefore been brought into the love of God.” Some translations of this verse say that the whole law is fulfilled by this single commandment. That wording is reminiscent of another of Jesus’ teachings: that he had come not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. If we consider that Jesus’ whole ministry, his life, his death and his resurrection, were all centered on the self-giving love of God for Creation, then we have come full circle. Paul can point the Galatians (and us) to a life lived in constant love for neighbor as the key to living an abundant life pleasing to God rather than to an attempt at careful adherence to each point of the Law that they could never hope to meet because Jesus, in his perfect love for all others, had fulfilled the Law on their behalf. All that remains for the Christian is to live as Jesus would have us live.

In order that we may live this life that so completely fulfills the Law, Paul warns us (through the Galatians), to live by the Spirit and not to gratify the desires of the flesh. It is important here not to fall into the error of thinking that Paul is talking about some kind of human mind/body dualism. It is, of course, not our own spirits that we are to live by but rather the guidance of the indwelling Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Nor is Paul advocating some sort of ascetic denial of the natural needs of the human body. Paul’s use of the Greek word *σὰρξ* or “flesh” rather refers to that inward part of humans that is in rebellion from God, that is separated from God, that has enthroned self-interest in the place that rightly belongs to God. Life lived according to the *σὰρξ*, to the flesh, is the opposite of loving God with all one’s heart and the neighbor as oneself. Elisabeth Johnson, whose work I’ve quoted this week and last, sums it up nicely: “Flesh (*sarx*) for Paul is not merely the physical body, but the whole self under the power of sin, with its self-serving desires and motives. This self is never satisfied, it seems, never has enough esteem, status, wealth, pleasure, or whatever else it is seeking. Self-indulgence easily becomes a new form of slavery.” Many modern translations of the Bible have wrestled with how best to communicate the concept of *σὰρξ* and, to my mind, the Jerusalem Bible does perhaps the best job of conveying the deeper rather than the literal truth by rendering *σὰρξ* as “self-indulgence.”

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With this in mind, Paul's list of vices falls into sharp contrast with his list of virtues. The former list is of behaviors that run contrary to putting the needs of the other first; the latter could be considered a description of self-giving love in action. Here, I think both our New Revised Standard Version and the Jerusalem Bible which I cited earlier as exemplary do us a disservice by rendering the first item of the first list as fornication. This makes it too easy to come to the conclusion that Paul is denouncing God's gift of appropriate sexual intimacy between partners, a charge often leveled against him. The New International Version and Phillips both translate the Greek *πορνεία* as "sexual immorality," which far better carries the connotation of the selfish use by one of the body of another. We can follow this track of selfishness throughout the first list, whether it is the promotion of the self over the needs of another human being or the denial of God at the center of life in favor of a twisted sense of self. It is hardly an exhaustive list of destructive behavior – again, from what we know of the Galatians, they could likely supply any bad ideas missing from Paul's list and so, I imagine, could most of us.

Hopefully, we are equally conversant with Paul's other list, that of the fruits of the Spirit. These are verses that I have often held up in my preaching as the very model of the life in Christ to which we all aspire. I wish I could tell you that I always do as good a job at holding these up in my life as I do in my speech. I hope I have the forgiveness of any of you and of others to whom I have not always been loving, patient, kind, generous or gentle. Like our brother Paul, I sometimes find that "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Perhaps, some of you, too, have found this to be true. But I continue to work on immersing myself in the Spirit of Jesus for, as Paul writes in verse 16 of our passage, "Live by the Spirit and you will by no means gratify the desires of the flesh." The Holy Spirit can conquer our own spirits of selfishness. We simply need to allow her to do her work.

Of course, sometimes that is far more easily said than done. "Let go and let God," is a popular reminder for a reason – we all need to hear it fairly often. It is hard for us not to pretend we are in charge of our own lives. I do not ascribe to the theory of original sin but there is something about that first rebellion of Adam and Eve, the placing of one's own selfish desires against the will of God, that seems disturbingly natural to humankind. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "The human heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?" And even if we are willing to let God have sway in our lives, it can be a frightening thing to try to follow the path without a book of rules to tell us what to do in each and every situation. It's much easier, isn't it, to have a checklist of things we must believe or do to be good Christians, good Baptists, good sheep of the Good Shepherd. God's command that we love our neighbors as ourselves, held up by Jesus and by Paul as the ultimate measure of how we function in society, is a vague and difficult gauge, accustomed as we are in this scientific age to precision in all things. Perhaps it is for the best that quantum physics is so reliant on the Uncertainty Principle. It reminds us that we live by faith.

My sisters and brothers, we are free. We live in a free country, almost without question the freest in the world. We come together here in a community that prizes the freedom of the human spirit, the legacy of our Baptist forebears for the past 400 years. Still, we know that true freedom is not always readily attained; it can be a long road indeed to realize the freedom of spirit that God has intended for us since the very beginning. But our God continues to lead us toward freedom, through mighty deeds and wonders, through loving care for us as the sheep of God's

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pasture. We have much to thank God for and for the inestimable gifts of love and joy and peace in particular. They are among the fruits of the Spirit, the Spirit that dwells within us and that leads us down the road walked by Jesus, the Christ, our Savior and our Redeemer. With joy in our hearts and song on our lips, propelled by the freedom that the Spirit brings, let us hasten, hasten along the way to Jesus, leaving behind selfishness and brokenness and joining with all of those who would make up God's Beloved Community. Amen.