

Spirit Not Flesh

“Lord, free us, make us one!” Such a prayer seems almost contradictory today because it seems like the more freedom a people has, the less unity they can find. At least, that seems to be the lesson of the past months here in the not-so United States of America. We have heard and read a great deal about freedom in recent days. Much of it has been, frankly, wrongheaded: all of those who snarl, bare faced, that requirements to wear masks in the midst of a pandemic infringe their freedoms; those who insist on the freedom to carry assault rifles and handguns wheresoever they choose; those who claim that the free and fair vote of the American people is an insidious plot to take away their freedom. Freedom is a concept much abused these days.

But this morning, I want us to think about freedom as Paul meant it: freedom to live our absolute best lives in the Spirit and under the leadership of Christ Jesus. With this well-known passage from Galatians in mind, I’d suggest that the ideals of freedom and love which Paul holds up to the Galatians have been upheld in the best traditions of our Baptist movement and by one of our most significant recent pastors, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memory we celebrate tomorrow. And, finally, I want to refresh us on what Paul meant when he contrasted life in the flesh with life in the Spirit and to call us all anew to the pursuit of the fruits of life in the Spirit.

As we know from the words of Paul to the Galatians, freedom is too often just a polite covering for self-indulgence. We should not be in the least surprised by this, given the way in which some folks are using their “freedom” these days. But freedom is also an important concept for those who are living in Christ. 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. 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. That means, though we may mourn it, that churches also have the right to re-draw those associations, even “disfellowshipping” those bodies of believers whom they feel have wandered too far from the pale. Our Evergreen Association is a prime example of this Baptist freedom in action. We should never forget that we are formed in large part by churches with whom other churches no longer wished to associate and by those who felt the disassociation was inappropriate. I believe that the Holy Spirit is trying to say something to ABC-USA in that Evergreen is growing and thriving, even though some in our denomination have consigned us to a sort of ecclesiastical “Island of Misfit Toys.” But maybe that’s just me. To return to Baptist freedoms, 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, as I mentioned at the start. 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. 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.

This love for one another is central to our lives as Christians and so I want to be very certain that I am clear when I speak of it. 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 $\phi\iota\lambda\epsilon\omega$, the love between siblings or friends, from which William Penn derived the name of his city Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, and $\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$, sexual or erotic love. The word Paul habitually uses is $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\eta$, and as its exemplar he holds up Jesus and the love for all people that caused Jesus, as Paul wrote the 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, freedom and self-indulgence. 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.'"

One of the most compelling champions for $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\epsilon$ love in our time was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was Dr. King who said, "In speaking of love we are not referring to some sentimental emotion. It would be nonsense to urge (people) to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense... When we speak of loving those who oppose us... we speak of a love which is expressed in the Greek word Agape. Agape means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate; it means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all (persons), an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return... Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community... It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community... If I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate, I do nothing but intensify the cleavages of a broken community."

Dr. King is most remembered in the activist community for his championing of nonviolent resistance as the most effective path for social change. He wrote: "Nonviolent resistance ... avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent, but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of

nonviolence stands the principle of love. The nonviolent resister would contend that in the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter or indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.”

The love of which he spoke, of course, was agape. He wrote: “Agape... is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object... Agape is disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving others for their sakes. It is an entirely ‘neighbor-regarding concern for others,’ which discovers the neighbor in every (one) it meets. Therefore, agape makes no distinction between friends and enemy; it is directed toward both. If one loves an individual merely on account of (their) friendliness, (one) loves (them) for the sake of the benefits to be gained from the friendship, rather than for the friend’s own sake. Consequently, the best way to assure oneself that love is disinterested is to have love for the enemy-neighbor from whom you can expect no good in return, but only hostility and persecution.” I firmly believe that it was Dr. King’s grasp of the concept of agape love, exemplified by the life of Jesus and preached to the Galatians by Paul, that has earned him the respect of so many around the world.

So, as American Baptists who continue to honor our traditional understanding of freedom and who celebrate the memory of our ABC brother, Martin Luther King, Jr., we should be well-prepared to hear the remainder of Paul’s lesson to the Galatians in this passage. Paul points 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 in the Spirit of Jesus, 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 *σαρξ* 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 *σαρξ*, to the flesh, is the opposite of loving God with all one’s heart and the neighbor as oneself. Elisabeth Johnson, whose work I quoted earlier, 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 *σαρξ* and, to my mind, the Jerusalem Bible does perhaps the best job of conveying the deeper

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rather than the literal truth by rendering σαρκῆ as “self-indulgence.” Or, to quote a modern proverb, “Humankind’s problem is that we love things and use people, instead of loving people and using things.”

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, of using people; 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 conclude 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 – 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.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” This is not a list of accomplishment boxes we can tick off and move on. This is the Jesus lifestyle. Just as a diet and exercise regimen may become a lifestyle with constant practice, with slip-ups and recoveries, through a willingness to make every day a new beginning, so life on the Jesus way may become a lifestyle. We cannot allow our fears of violence and horror at injustices to make us callous, angry, and vengeful. We must practice our freedom to love, to love as best we can in the same way that Jesus loves, with agape love, a love that is joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and self-giving. That is life in the Spirit and that same indwelling Spirit, our Comforter and Advocate, will empower us to live as we were always meant to live. Thanks be to God! Amen.