

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge 6/30/2019

Pentecost 3

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 and Luke 9:51-62

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” Those stirring words from Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia carry particular resonance for us as we approach the celebration of our freedoms as a nation this coming Thursday. By the way, don’t you love it when the Fourth falls on a Thursday and gives us a nice long weekend? Whatever your plans are for the Fourth I hope you will have some time to reflect on what freedom truly means, which is to say, what does it mean for you and me to be truly free? In our modern world freedom is often understood as the ability to do what we want to do when we want to do it. So long as what I want to do doesn’t affect anyone else, I should be free to do it, is how the thinking goes. Another version of this is that freedom means being free from any entanglements or any ties that might bind us or restrict us. “No limits” is what lots of marketing materials promise us. Nothing holding you back. That also implies that one is not responsible for or to anyone except oneself. Freedom means no one can tell me what to do! “You’re not the boss of me!” every 5-year-old has said.

Paul has an entirely different idea about freedom and it’s summed up in that beautiful sentence, “for freedom Christ has set us free.” It carries not only the heart of the gospel--Christ has set us free—it also suggests that our lives and our actions are to reflect that freedom in Christ. And freedom isn’t an abstraction. Freedom in Christ will have practical consequences in our lives.

Now here's a paradox. Don't use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, Paul says, but through love become *slaves* to one another. What? Become slaves? Isn't slavery the opposite of freedom? Apparently not. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's interesting to note here that neighbor love—*agape* is the Greek verb here, and *agape* means love with no strings attached. And love ourselves in the same way. Paul's understanding of neighbor love—and remember he's just repeating the law handed down from Moses and re-emphasized by Jesus—holds that we ought to value our neighbor **and** ourselves—you wouldn't want someone to "bite or devour" you, Paul says, so don't do it to them. We sometimes forget the "as yourself" part of this commandment. A wise old teacher of mine once said, "You **will** love your neighbor as you love yourself." Which is to say that it is only in understanding *ourselves* as God's own beloved that we will know love and have love to pass along to others. If our own well of love is dried up, there won't be anything to give to anyone else.

Now Paul moves from the abstract to the practical as he contrasts the desires of the flesh with the fruits of the Spirit. And then he presents us with a long list of each one. First, we need to understand, that by "flesh" Paul doesn't mean the carnal. The "flesh" means our egoic, self-centered nature. It might be either impulsive or calculating. But the "flesh" is that part of our nature that puts us at the center of the universe. **Our** wants, **our** needs, **our** desires, trump anyone and anything else. Hard to

practice neighbor love when all our attention is focused on our own wants!

So let's look at the list of the works of the flesh. Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, things like these, he says. When we think of "sins of the flesh" we immediately recognize "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, and drunkenness and carousing." And we probably tell ourselves, "Well thank goodness. I don't go in for any of *that* stuff." But wait a minute. There's more on the list. Enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy. Maybe we're hitting a little closer to home now. If we think we don't indulge ourselves in one or more of these from time to time, we're fooling ourselves. Here's what each one of those behaviors from fornication through carousing have in common. Each of these behaviors is a self-centered seeking to satisfy some egoic desire. Fornication is the act of using another person's body for the satisfaction of our own needs and wants and desires. Fornication considers the other person not as a person but as an object—an object to be used by **me**. Paul is often mistakenly characterized as being a prude. Not so. What Paul condemns here is the objectification of the other for our own self-satisfaction; treating the other not as a person beloved by God, but as an object. Continue down the list. Enmity, strife, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions. You see how these are all about, "I'm right and you're wrong, I'm good, you're bad?" You see how these are all about asserting our own self-centered, egoic needs to be right, to be justified, to be

powerful? Once again, it's all about **ME**! Envy and jealousy. Well, that's pretty straightforward. You have something I want. I need what **you** have to satisfy **my** needs. It's all about **ME**. Sorcery and idolatry? Sorcery, in Paul's time, was about manipulating the world of the spirits for one's own ends. It was about power and control. Idolatry? Well, that's as modern as this morning's newspaper. We worship a huge and pervasive idol in our culture. Mammon. Money. If only I had more money, I would be OK, we tell ourselves. We think money will save us. Like sorcery, idols are objects that we manipulate to satisfy our own self-centered wants and needs. It's all about **ME**.

Quite an exhaustive list. And if you don't recognize at least a couple of these behaviors in your own life, well, look again. The "flesh" is all about selfishness and control. Hard to practice love of our neighbor, love of others, when we only care about ourselves. Hard to practice neighbor love when it's all about **ME**.

Now contrast that, as Paul does, with the fruits of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These fruits of the Spirit are the products of the freedom for which Christ has made us free. Ask yourself which kind of person would you rather be around? One who is angry, quarrelsome, divisive? One who always needs to be right, to be justified, to be powerful? One who uses other people—maybe even you've been used in this way—to satisfy her or his own selfish desires? Or would you rather be around a person who exudes joy and peace and patience? One who practices kindness and love? One who, through self-control and

faithfulness, doesn't return anger for anger, doesn't engage in quarrelsome and divisive behavior, one who restrains the deep-seated human impulses to satisfy our needs at the expense of others? Which of these persons would you rather be around? More to the point, which of these persons do you want to be? There's a question for us to ponder as we ponder the freedom for which Christ has set us free. And as you're thinking about that question, "Will I be a person of the flesh or a person of the Spirit this day, this hour, this minute," ask yourself another question. A simple question. Which one will make you feel better? How do you feel when you're filled with anger and fight energy, when you want to quarrel or disagree with anything and everything? How does that make you feel? Oh, you might get that little self-righteous thrill for a while when you're up on your high horse, but really, in the long run, anger and strife and quarrels and dissension and factions and bitterness are just exhausting. All that anger and bile will make you sick. Lust and greed and jealousy and envy, whether it's sexual or material; how does that make you feel? Yuck, right? That is, if we're conscious. I mean, what truly conscious person would ever choose to live with any of these desires of the flesh? Any of them? But the sad truth is, in this broken world, too many people are **unconscious** most of the time. And so we give ourselves over to the flesh without thinking about it. It's what Paul means when he says over and over that we are slaves to the flesh.

When we choose, **really choose**, how we want to live, who among us wouldn't choose to live a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control? How good does that feel, right? Of course that's the way we want to live. Good energy, positive energy, just feels better than bad energy, and negative energy.

The freedom to make this choice, the choice to live in the flesh or in the Spirit, this is the freedom for which Christ has set us free. And it's a choice we're called to make in every moment of our lives. How do we do it? How do we come to consciousness of this freedom in Christ? Through prayer. A practice of daily prayer, opening our hearts and minds and eyes and ears to the presence of Christ in our lives. Living consciously means living prayerfully. Living consciously and prayerfully means choosing not to live as a slave to the flesh. It means choosing to live in patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and gentleness.

So as we celebrate what it means to be a free people in this great nation of ours this week, let's also consider what it means to be truly free—free of the demands of the flesh, the demands of anger and bitterness and self-righteousness and lust and envy. We do have a choice to make.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

The lovely old Collect for Peace that we pray at Morning Prayer is a good place to start. Let us pray.

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life, to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, from all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

