

Christian Freedom
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
June 26, 2022

Next week, we mark the Fourth of July – Independence Day, where we as a country celebrate our freedom. The symbol of our freedom is the Statue of Liberty. She was given as a gift to the United States, from France, in 1876, marking 100 years since the Declaration of Independence. Since then, it has become a worldwide symbol of freedom.

The cry for freedom is not a modern term. The Apostle Paul made a declaration of freedom 2000 years ago – a Christian Freedom. We are going to read about it in our scripture passage today.

Before we do, let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When in high school, I attended a Presbyterian Church near my home. To this day, I still remember a sermon where the preacher talked about democracy. He said, “We are free, but with democracy comes responsibility.” This responsibility includes voting and obeying the law. Last Thursday, I received a jury summons, a responsibility in our democracy.

Democracy is not just about my freedoms and my rights; it is also responsibility to others. Freedom is about living in community. Our scripture passage says the same thing about Christianity. We have freedom in Christ, but our freedom is not all about you. It’s focused around the commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

There is an issue the Apostle Paul is facing with his new believers. You will notice that in our scripture reading, we skipped twelve verses. I didn’t skip them; the lectionary readings skipped them. The omitted passages are on circumcision (which is probably why these verses were avoided). The new Christians faced an issue. The first Christians were Jewish and still followed the Jewish Law, including circumcision.

But now, Gentiles (or non-Jews) were following the risen Jesus as well. The question became: do the Christian Gentiles need to be circumcised, too? It became a heated issue. Many Jewish Christians were saying “yes,” these Gentile Christians need to follow the law. Get circumcised, keep laws, observe certain customs and rituals, and then you are really saved.

Paul writes and says you are no longer under the law. Get out from under that “yoke of slavery.” You are free from the law. You are not justified or made right by the law, but by trusting in Christ’s work alone. We are not saved by obeying a list of dos and don’t.

I think of that famous verse in Ephesians: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – not by works.” Do not make the Gentiles follow the Law. Paul says in one of the verses we skipped: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value,” (Much to the relief of the uncircumcised Gentiles!)

As a young Christian, I remember reading verse one in our passage about being free in Christ, and I didn’t get it. I grew up with a Christianity that said I had to obey all kinds of rules in order to get God to like me. I didn’t feel free in Christ at all. Until I was introduced to grace – there is nothing you can do or not do to make God love you more or less. God just does.

Yet, with this grace, this freedom in Christ, comes responsibility. Stop fighting among themselves, Paul says, and live by the Spirit. Love your neighbor as yourself, even when you disagree with them. Freedom in Christ is serving one another in love. This is your responsibility. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (verse 6)

Throughout the New Testament, which Paul wrote most, he has three main uses of Love. First is God’s love for us. Second is our love for God. Third is our love for fellow humans. This is for you word nerds. Paul uses love 115 times. Of those, a little over 20 refer to God’s love for us, about 5 or 6 refer to our love for God, and almost 90 out of 115 verses on love refer to our love for fellow humans. That’s 78% of the time!

Love your neighbor as yourself.

My brothers and sisters, Paul says, you are called to be free, but do not use your freedom in Christ to bite and devour one another (apparently, the argument over circumcision was getting out of hand!), but serve one another in love.

What this means is there are a whole lot of things you must not do as a baptized follower of Christ. Paul calls them the work of the flesh. They have no place in the Christian life: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions [one Bible translation says ‘the feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group’] ²¹.

Going back to the sermon I heard all those years ago when the pastor said “with democracy comes responsibility to community.” The works of the flesh Paul lists here have a sense of the breakdown of community. Living by the flesh cuts others off. As one commentator said, “Christ did not set you free to be a jerk.” (Scott Hoezee)

Instead, we are called to pursue Spirit-filled acts. They grow in us as we stay connected to the Spirit. Nine lovely characteristics are listed (you heard them in the children’s message: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control) and “together they make up Christ-like identity and character in us.”

Our passage is not saying behave so God will save you, rather God already saved you so act like it. The “fruit of the Spirit” are virtues that exist in relationships, in community. It is a matter of ‘Be who in baptism you already are.’ (Hoezee)

In an email blast about a month ago, I talked about a prayer that I learned on vacation: “Lord, baptize my eyes.” It’s asking God to help us see others as God’s creation. When we do, we treat them differently.

I shared the story of traveling to Minneapolis, and the airlines lost my luggage. It was 9 p.m. at night as I followed the signs to the luggage claim office. The small room was already crowded as I walked in. I was followed by a man who immediately let us all know in a loud voice how horrible this was, how inconvenienced he was, this was uncalled for, etc, etc.... interspersed with swear words.

I looked at the 2 airline employees whose job was to help us find our luggage. Baptize my eyes, Lord. I was determined not to lower myself to the level of this still screaming man. Patience. Kindness. Self-control. I thanked them for what they do.

In my email blast, I didn't tell what happened next, but kindness and gentleness and patience was extended to me. I followed the signs for the rental cars. When I got to the counters, there was a sign that said "Closed. Take tram to Terminal 1."

I followed the signs for the tram, and I walked and walked and walked – all alone in the airport. I found the tram. It took me to the main terminal, and I began to follow the signs for rental cars. And I walked and walked and walked (getting lost a few times). I finally got to the rental car area (it was huge). No one was there except for one man under the sign of the rental agency I needed.

After signing papers, he gave me instructions to the garage: go up that long escalator, turn left, turn right, follow the signs.

So, I walked and walked, followed the signs in the garage. I was the only person there until I saw one man sitting on a stool near the agency I wanted. Maybe he saw me all alone and without my luggage. I wonder if he prayed "Baptise my eyes, Lord," because he demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit.

"What kind of car can I get you?" he said cheerfully.

I told him I paid for a mid-size car. "Follow me," he said. "I will show you what I got." Never has anyone ever helped me at an airport car rental before.

I told him I was going to drive around a 100 year old woman who was under 5 feet. She needed to be able to get into the passenger seat and a walker with large wheels needed to fit in the back.

"I have two cars for you." He opened up the passenger side doors. "Take a look," he said. He opened up the back hatch of both cars. We walked back and forth between both cars. He was patient and kind and gentle. Even when I couldn't figure out how to turn on the headlights and he had already walked away, he came back with joy in helping me.

To this day, I still remember that man. His actions touched me so much when I was tired and luggageless that I told the rental car company about him when they asked me to take a survey. I hope I can be so kind to others.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

And let's be clear: you can't wake up one day and decide you are going to be more patient. All you need to do is get into the car, and it is all over.

I've learned that the fruit of the Spirit is not something we strive for and try to implement in ourselves on our own. The fruit of the Spirit is exhibited in our lives when we are dependent on the Spirit. We can't force love, joy, peace, patience to grow within us. We bear fruit when we stay connected to the Spirit, when we walk in the Spirit.

"Keep step with the Spirit," our passage says. We are called to adjust our lives to the Spirit. The Spirit takes the lead. "What remains is just trotting along after the Holy Spirit to see all the rich, juicy, abundant fruit that Spirit can and will grow on the branches of our lives." (Hoezee)

Most of this sermon was written before Friday when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade*. Many of you are devastated. Many of you have been waiting for this day for 50 years. Many of you can see both sides and don't know what to think. I am not going to stand up here and tell you what I think. What I am saying today is this scripture passage tells you how to act towards one another in the midst of it all.

As you encounter people this week with whom you disagree, do not demonstrate acts of the flesh: hatred, discord, fits of rage, dissensions, factions. Rather walk in the Spirit so the fruit of the Spirit will be demonstrated in you towards others: patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control.

Verse 6 of Galatians 5: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

So let's go to a time of prayer asking God to help us and fill us with the Spirit.

There is music and singing with our prayer. (like we do in Taize worship services). We will sing a chorus interspersed throughout the prayer. We will play it through once and then we will sing it. The words to the chorus are in your bulletin and the music is on your handout. After we are finished praying, we will sing the whole song, which is the handout. (Some of you have a handout with a red line going down the middle – ignore it. Our printer decided to be creative that day.)

We, please teach us the chorus, and then we will enter into prayer.

Pastoral Prayer

Mighty God, remind us today that faith is a verb, an active trust in Jesus. We don't want a coffee-table faith that's mostly display, or a bookish faith that only lives in our head. Give us a faith that lives and breathes and walks out the door into everyday life, carrying with it joy, peace, and love for all, always trusting in what Jesus has done for us. Hear our prayer.

Fill me now, Fill me now, Spirit come and fill me now.

Fill me now, fill me now, Spirit come and fill me now.

Today, help us to do all we can to keep in step with the Spirit, catching all your rhythms of grace and love. Wherever we show up this week, may we share the hope that is within us and offer love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control to all we meet...even when we disagree with them. Hear our prayer.

Fill me now, Fill me now, Spirit come and fill me now.

Fill me now, fill me now, Spirit come and fill me now.

Gracious God, we pray for our country as decisions have been made that are causing so much emotion and conflict. Guide us forward. Show us how to live with one another in all our differences. Give our leaders compassion and wisdom in the days ahead. Hear our prayer.

Fill me now, Fill me now, Spirit come and fill me now.

Fill me now, fill me now, Spirit come and fill me now.

In one voice, we pray together the prayer Jesus taught us saying, Our Father.....