

**June 26, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Spirit, Holy God, that we might hear and receive the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning is from Paul's letter to the Galatians, Chapter 5, verse 1, and 13 through 25. Listen now for the word of the lord.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. **14** For the whole law is summed up in a *single* commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **15** If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. **16** Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. **19** Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, **21** envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

**22** By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. **24** And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **25** If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Freedom. For *freedom* Christ has set us free. Freedom.

Freedom is a big word, here in the United States. Freedom means everything to us, as Americans.

Our country was birthed on the dream of freedom. It is for freedom that the revolutionary war was fought and won and it was in the name of freedom that our government was created. All for freedom.

But have you ever really stopped? Take a minute to pause, and think...do we really even know what freedom is? How do we define freedom?

We have freedom, here in the united states, yes - but we have the freedom that we and our forefathers, WE defined as free.

Interestingly, the Galatians were not free. Not as we define and understand freedom. They lived under Roman occupation. They were a new religious minority and under religious persecution. And likely many of the Galatians, new converts to Christianity, they likely gave up their family and social circles to be there. To be this new church.

Yet, Paul says they are free. “For freedom, Christ has set you free.” So how can they be free?

They are free not in the *fragile* reality of freedom that we deem we have the right to define. No, they are free because they are free in Christ.

Christ has set them free. Freedom in Christ is different than what we define as freedom.

Paul tells the Galatians that they were called to freedom. But not an earthy freedom tainted by sin that just serves themselves. No. Freedom in Christ. It is freedom rooted in love. Made manifest in service to others.

Freedom in Christ is summed up in the whole of the law. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And it is because of Christ, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that this freedom is possible for the Galatians, and for us here today. Christ’s life and ministry shows us what true freedom is.

A freedom rooted in relationship with each other. A freedom that takes action to serve one another. A freedom that seeks to understand who our neighbors truly are, not just those here beside you, but those whom we push aside. Even those we do not like.

All of this made possible because of our relationship with Christ. How Christ has served us. It is a freedom that is ethical, communal, and equal.

It is a freedom that is rooted in action, it is a freedom FOR a particular purpose. A gift given with responsibility.

This freedom in Christ makes radical loving service possible, which fulfills the will of God for human relationships. For humanity.

But, unfortunately, this is much easier said than done. Paul knows this.

The fragility of humanity means we all too easily fall to the ways of the flesh. Paul’s language of ‘the flesh’ is used as a term for self-centered living as opposed to God-centered living. And when we fall to the ways of the flesh, self-centered ways, we cannot live the freedom of Christ.

The churches in Galatia were at a difficult point in their life as the church. They were a newly formed christian community whose members were both jewish and gentiles.

After Paul left Galatia, other teachers came in and preached that the gentile converts to Christianity needed to adhere to the Jewish laws: specifically circumcision and the food restrictions.

Paul writes passionately to the Galatians to say no! Freedom in Christ, a freedom rooted in love for one another, a freedom that is not self serving, a freedom that is guided by the spirit...this freedom is made possible because Christ has fulfilled the law. Life is Christ's freedom from bondage to the law.

Thus these Christian gentiles do not need to adhere to the Jewish laws. This freedom rooted in Christ, rooted in equality and service to others, this freedom is not bound to matters of circumcision or food. This freedom says followers of Christ are free to choose what to do with their body. The only thing that matters in God's kingdom is faith working through Christ's love.

But this freedom is scary. It's bold and uncomfortable. Their charge as new Christians is not to cover up their fear of Christ's freedom in internal squabbles about bodily autonomy. Their charge is to go out into the world, led by the Spirit, to love and serve in such a loving way that they would give themselves.

This freedom is scary because it is not about us as an individual. Our freedom is not our own. It is Christ's gift to us and thus requires action.

Walking by the spirit is not an option for Christians. It is central to who we are.

What are the ways of self-centered living that we try to cover up in our notion of freedom? Our understanding of what it means to be free? All rooted in our fear of the radical call of Christ's freedom?

What ways do we live selfishly because we believe we have earned the freedom to do so? What ways do we ignore our neighbor because our freedom is just for ourselves? In what ways do we use freedom to mask hypocrisy?

In what ways does our society use protecting freedom as a mask for corrupting power? Stripping the rights of so many just to protect the power of so few?

I woke up Friday morning truly terrified. And the fear has not subsided. I stand before you all this morning terrified. Terrified for myself, and for all the people in this country who saw *their* bodily autonomy stripped away in an instant.

Stripped away in this country founded on *freedom*. And yet the supreme court ruling's ruling only takes freedom away.

It only oppresses women, traps them in systemic poverty, puts them in danger, abandons them, takes away their dignity and right to comprehensive healthcare, and deems them unworthy of the body society has constantly told them is tainted, ugly, impure, sinful, and a disgrace.

Friday was yet another day, **another day** that this country took drastic steps to take freedom away from so many - all to protect the power of the few.

This is not freedom in Christ. This is not Christ's freedom.

We have fallen to the ways of the flesh, we have bitten and devoured one another - and we keep falling deeper and deeper.

Just like the Galatians who were fixated on laws about bodies, we too are fixated on these laws because we are afraid of the radical freedom rooted in Christ.

A freedom that demands we give up our control, our power, our love for things that only help us as individuals, and follow the spirit to love.

To serve. To treat people with dignity. To treat people with equality. To love them as we love ourselves.

Paul tells the Galatians, and he tells us too...to be called to freedom is not something we can do on our own. And thank goodness for that.

To be called to freedom in Christ we must live by the spirit. And we must do it together.

So what are we going to do? The spirit? She's right here. Right here among us. Are we going to follow her?

You know, we come here on Sunday morning, and our worship service begins and ends, and then we leave. In a tangible and logical way, our worship service has a beginning and ending. But theologically, it doesn't.

The final blessing is a charge to walk outside those doors and continue worshiping. Only the worship is no longer hymns and liturgy. It is going out into the community to seek out our neighbor and love them in the love Christ made possible.

That's freedom!

The Galatians weren't free as we know - but they were free in Christ. We have our manmade freedom, but are we free in Christ? Walk out those doors today, follow the spirit, and see.

Amen.