THE FREEDOM THAT CHRIST OFFERS

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

June 30, 2019

A few decades ago when I was living in Los Angeles, I went to visit Forest Lawn Cemetery in the heart of the city because it was noted for having some interesting historical attractions. After browsing through a building that contained all kinds of displays and artifacts related to our Revolutionary War and the independence that we celebrate this week, I remember walking outside and seeing this huge 10-foot concrete statue of Jesus with arms outstretched and this quote from Galatians chiseled in the base of the statue, “For freedom, Christ has set you free.”

Even back then, several years before I had been introduced to the justice-oriented and non-violent way of Jesus, something about this biblical quote being used to justify our war against the British in order to gain our political freedom did not seem right. To use this biblical quote in this way was just another way of calling on the name of Jesus to validate and bless our use of military weaponry and warfare in order to liberate ourselves from an oppressive government—something that our government has been doing throughout our 243-year history every time that we call upon the name of God to bless America in order to validate and justify our military endeavors for the purpose of protecting and preserving our precious freedom.

The freedom about which the Apostle Paul speaks in our lesson for today is not synonymous with the political freedom that we often associate with our democratic ideals and free market enterprise. Nor is the freedom that we have in Christ synonymous with our freedom of speech, of religion, of assembly, or of our right to bear arms. The freedom that we have in Christ is the freedom to be all that we were created by God to be and the freedom to do all that Jesus has called us to do by the power of the Holy Spirit. The freedom that we have in Christ is the freedom to refrain from giving in to all of our internal temptations and from giving in to all of the pressures of the world around us that would have us act in any way that might be contrary to the will of God.

More specifically, the freedom that we have in Christ is the freedom to refrain from acting on our fears, from indulging in our pride and conceit, and from doing whatever we might darn well please no matter how harmful to another human being or to any of God’s creation. The freedom that we have in Christ is the freedom to refuse to bear arms, the freedom to love even our enemies, and the freedom to refrain from investing in our military industrial complex. The freedom that we have in Christ is to be free from any guilt that we might have as the result of doing something wrong, to be free from the anxiety that we might bear unnecessarily, and to be free from the worry about what others may think of us if we do choose to follow in the way of Jesus according to the fruit of the Spirit.

So let’s dwell on this fruit of the Spirit for a moment. The first thing to note is that the word “fruit” in this passage is in the singular, not the plural. If we were talking about fruits of the Spirit, then we could surmise that you might be the one who is filled with love, but not me. Likewise, I may be the one who is filled with patience, but not you. However, if we are living by the Spirit as Paul says, then we all are filled with the fruit of the Spirit that includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and what I prefer to call ego-control.

As the Apostle Paul states, there is no law against such ways of being in this world. Now I am going to go out on a limb here and suggest that there is no law that a society can pass that can regulate or control the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and ego-control that we bear inside our being because in Christ we are free to be all of these ways and more. A society might try to prevent us from acting on this fruit of the Spirit by passing laws that would restrict our acts of love or our desire to be generous, but with our freedom in Christ, we are free to be as loving or as generous as we choose to be even if we might have to bear the consequences of breaking such laws that are passed by sinful and sometimes evil human beings—the same kind of consequences that Jesus experienced as he challenged the pious Sabbath laws and cultural norms of his day.

Another reason why I like to focus on this fruit of the Spirit in the singular is to address what I often call the comparison syndrome. One of the greatest temptations that we face as human beings is comparing ourselves to others either to prove that we are better than others, and thereby superior to them, or to determine that we are less than others, and thereby inferior to them. Once that we start dealing with each attribute of the fruit of the Spirit in this way, we really are in trouble, because I may see myself as more kind than you, or you may see yourself as more faithful than me, whereby we are determining our self-worth based upon a false comparison that will only lead us to bullying or lording ourselves over others or the opposite behavior of degrading ourselves and dwelling in our own unworthiness. There is no freedom in such comparisons because we are not accepting ourselves for who we are or respecting others for who they are.

Another thing that I would like to remind you is that this list of attributes of the fruit of the Spirit is not an exhaustive or complete list. If I had been the Apostle Paul in putting together this list, I certainly would have added to the fruit of the Spirit such attributes as compassion, honesty, integrity, humility, authenticity, non-violence, and, for sure, freedom. What attributes would you like to add to this list that might reflect the fruit of the Spirit with which we all have been endowed as beloved children of God and siblings of Jesus, our Christ?

During this month of pride, many of us in the church also have come to refer to this day as Pride Sunday. Given all that has taken place throughout history to condemn, ostracize, persecute, and even kill people who are homosexual, we are compelled today to declare, “For freedom, Christ has set you free—set you free to be what you were created by God to be, set free to love as you have been called to love, set free to make love as you so choose, set free to marry whom you will, and set free to parent as you desire so long as you do so according to the fruit of the Spirit against which there is no law to prevent you from being as loving, joyful, peaceful, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, and considerate of others as we all have been blessed with the capacity to be.”

To be clear, the Apostle Paul is not suggesting that there aren’t any laws that we might need in our lives to guide our behavior and nurture all of our relationships. That is why he picks up on Jesus’ own instructions and tells the people at Galatia that the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as you yourself have been loved by God.” Now I understand the psychology of saying that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, which is to imply that we cannot truly love our neighbors until we fully love ourselves. However, if I am going to choose to love my neighbor based upon how I am feeling about myself on any given day, then too bad for my neighbor if I am not feeling much love for myself today. Theologically, our love for our neighbor is not grounded in our love of self, but rather in our knowing in every cell of our being the complete love that God has for each and every one of us.

In all of this glorious hype about how free we are in Christ, Paul issues a warning to us, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” Given the political climate these days, we all can attest to the fact that self-indulgence is running rampant throughout our country, putting a lot of pressure on all of us to jump on the bandwagon if we want to make it in this world. There is another world to which we all are called by Jesus to aspire. Jesus often referred to this world as the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. However, knowing that the word “kingdom” has some pretty negative connotations in this temporal and often imperial world, we have come to understand that Jesus’ reference to this alternative way of life also can be known as God’s beloved community in which all forms of self-indulgence give way to the fruit of the Spirit.

Finally, the freedom that we have in Christ is especially evident in God’s gracious gift of forgiveness as Paul points out in the very first paragraph of this letter to the Galatians. No matter how often we sin or how terrible our sin may be, we always can count on God’s promise of forgiveness as revealed in Jesus, our Christ to set us free from our sin. That having been said, many people will pose the question, “If God is so gracious and generous with this gift of forgiveness, then what is to keep us from going out and doing whatever we want that might be contrary to God’s will, and then simply turn back to God and ask God for forgiveness?” Such is the perfect example of self-indulgence—a perpetual sin that will prevent us from being an integral part of God’s beloved community. If that is how you choose to live, then so be it.

The Apostle Paul describes for us today a better, more meaningful, and more complete life that we can choose to live—one that is grounded in the love of God and the freedom that we have in Jesus, our Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We all have been created with this capability to respond to God’s love in this way as we abide in the Spirit and allow the fruit of the Spirit to guide us in all of our thoughts, words, and deeds. As we live into this vision and hope, may the love and peace of God that goes beyond all of our human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds ever faithful unto Jesus Christ so that we may be free to be all that we have been created by God to be. Amen.