

**Let Freedom Ring!** Reading: Galatians 6:1-16 Proper 9/C 7/3/22

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Do you remember what the Magna Carta was all about? It was originally known as the Great Charter of Freedoms agreed to by King John of England and a group of English barons back in June of 1215. This medieval charter was drafted in response to years of the king's oppressive and unjust rule. It guaranteed English political liberties that included due process of law. Surprisingly, it also contained women's rights such as the right not to marry as long as a woman wished to remain without a husband. It also granted her the right to her inheritance at her husband's death "at once and without trouble."

The Magna Carta influenced both the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the United States. Being a potent symbol of liberty, it is no wonder that Paul's letter to the Galatians is often referred to as the Magna Carta of Christian Freedom. It is this subject of Christian freedom that I would like to address in today's sermon.

As we celebrate our Independence Day, I am reminded of Americans' thirst for freedom such as political freedom, economic freedom, the freedom to bear arms, the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the freedom of religion, the freedom of marriage equity, and the freedom to vote unhindered. With the Supreme Court's recent negation of bodily autonomy, many women are now distraught as they are stripped of their reproductive freedom.

Freedom has always been one of my core values. Being educated in the city of Boston, my passion to fight oppression was strengthened by the early patriots such as Patrick Henry who said: "I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" As I became a teenager,

my desire for freedom expanded to wanting personal freedoms such as staying overnight at a friend's house, the freedom to call my own shots, putting an end to the family habit of keeping secrets or silence, and of course riding a motorcycle. All these freedoms I experienced by my early twenties. Yet in spite of these personal freedoms, I still did not feel totally free inside.

I was not free from the hurt perpetrated by others who were at times unkind. I was not free from worrying about the future. I was enslaved by resentments from the past. I was not free from anger, judgement, and aggression that could arise when my will was thwarted. As a result, my joy was depleted and my peace of mind disturbed. It would be many years later before I understood the freedom that comes from living in the Spirit of God: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness, Faithfulness, and Self Control." (Gal.5) This is what Christian Freedom offers at its best and it is what Jesus would call the Kingdom of God on earth. So let's take a closer look at the Magna Carta of Christian freedom - Paul's letter to the Galatians, in order to better understand how each of us can become free.

First, let's begin with an overview of the context: Galatia was a territory in western Asia which is now part of modern-day Turkey. Paul had visited several towns in this region where small churches were established, sometime around the year 50 C.E. While instructing the Galatians on how to be a faithful community, Paul taught that Christians were free from following the burden of Jewish law. However, even though they were free from having to adhere to Jewish Law, they needed to walk by, live by, and be guided by the Spirit of Christ in order to remain faithful to the path of love that Jesus demonstrated.

Later, Christian missionaries (of Jewish background) visited these churches and convinced many in these congregations that such freedom was nonsense. Instead, these missionaries emphasized the necessity to follow the Jewish laws which included circumcision and other rituals. They argued that only the Law can

curb and discipline the unruly impulses that lead to a moral crisis. As a result of these seemingly conflicting teachings, the parishioners in the Galatian Church began to fight among themselves, quarreling, backbiting, and breaking into factions, thereby destroying the unity of their community. In response to this infighting, Paul had a snit fit and wrote this very strong letter to these Galatians!

In the Letter, he claims that there are two opposing bases of operation in which a person can find herself. One base of operation is that of *the flesh* which some would call the wounded ego, or the self-centered individual, or the autonomous fallen humanity living at odds with God. From this base of operation, fleshy impulses and disordered desires arise that can lead us into doing things that are illegal, immoral, and selfish. This includes actions by people who are controlled by their addictions, passions, and emotional neediness that can harm and destroy relationships. These offenses include unruly outbursts such as animosity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy. These are the offenses that are destroying the congregation in Galatia. These are also the very same impulses that can destroy a marriage, a family, and even our democracy.

We are currently witnessing these selfish impulses operating in Congress where some of our elected officials are more interested in being re-elected than promoting the welfare of the country. What has happened to their character and moral courage, something that is so needed today to protect our democracy? How has it come to be that our own country has become so rife with dissension and factions between political parties such that we cannot safely discuss differing views without devouring one another? But this disunity and quarreling is not limited to congress or congregations. Last year I knew of families who wouldn't come together for a Thanksgiving meal because of differing political opinions. Today, some are avoiding 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations due to the denial of freedom by recent court decisions.

Paul would say that most Americans (like the Galatians) are operating from *the flesh*, that self-indulgent wounded ego which tries to dominate another. Paul might even go so far as to say: “Contrary to conventional wisdom, Christianity has never really taken deep root in America or has had any success in forming its consciousness.” How else can we explain our country’s obsession with money, guns, and wars, as well as its tacit approval of discrimination across race, class, gender and sexuality? But there is no need to despair, for there is another way of walking in the world that is both hopeful and faithful.

Paul claims that there is another base of operation a Christian might find himself in. This base of operation is that of *the Spirit*. The Spirit is the active presence of God performing mighty deeds within the community. This Spirit of God is the ONLY agent powerful enough to overcome the desires of the flesh, those powerful internal cravings that are all about *me, myself, and I*, which cause discord within relationships. We call this power of God, *grace*, a power greater than our ego strength alone. It is only by walking, living, and being guided by the Spirit of God that we are offered true freedom through grace.

And what exactly is that freedom? Christian freedom is not about unrestrained permission to do whatever we please but rather possessing a natural inclination to do what is right, just, and in accordance with God’s will. How do we know when we are walking in accordance with this Spirit? We know by its fruit: “Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness, Faithfulness, and Self Control.” (Gal.5)

The best way a Christian can transition (from a place of *the flesh* to walking in the ways of *the Spirit*) is through sacrificial service to one’s neighbor. In today’s reading from Galatians, Paul offers a few examples of how Christians act when they are being guided by Spirit. First, they bear one another’s burdens. (Gal. 6:2) That is what loving one’s neighbor is all about. It is the willingness to see the heavy weight on another and care enough about that person to want to do something

about it. This kind of loving service is at the core of Stephen Ministries, visiting the sick, bringing food and communion to the homebound, or being generous with one's resources. If we don't take care of one another, who will?

I recently read an article about a man who lived alone and had to surrender his dog to a shelter because he was undergoing a surgery with a long recovery. When one of the nurses heard about his plight, she went to the shelter and adopted the dog until such time the man could take care of the dog himself. Paul says: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ."

Second, a person who is walking in the Spirit of God does not throw in the towel when the going gets tough. Instead, one holds onto hope knowing that truth and justice will triumph in the end. "So let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Gal. 6:9) Finally, Paul states that people who live in the Spirit will engage in regular self-examination, becoming aware of their own unruly impulses, their judgmental thoughts, and their harsh emotions rather than focus on other people's failures. "All must test their own work...rather than their neighbor's work." (Gal. 6:4) Or as Matthew would later say in his gospel: "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Mt. 7:5)

Paul emphasized freedom when he wrote to the Galatians. He said: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free...But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in humble love." (Gal. 5) "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit...for people reap what they sow." (Gal. 6:7&8)

May Freedom ring for all of God's people!