



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

What do you do with your Freedom?

by Rev. John Strommen on Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Sunday, June 30, 2019

With fourth of July this week, many of us have liberty and freedom on our minds. Coincidentally, freedom is a major theme of our Bible passages today. Indeed, Christ has made us free! This freedom is not political freedom, however. It's not about guaranteeing individual rights or encouraging you to "do what you want to do, go where you want to go, be who you want to be."

The first verse in the Galatians text gets at the unique nature of this freedom: "For freedom Christ has set us free. *Stand firm*, therefore, and do not submit to the yoke of slavery." This invokes kind of a military metaphor: don't let hostile forces take up operations in your freedom and enslave you.

Now, when many people think of being set free to live in freedom, they think of running in the open air with no constraints, no boundaries. I do, anyway. Like Maria in the "The Sound of Music," you know the scene at the beginning of the movie, where she's singing and twirling freely in a mountain meadow. You have the sense that she can go in any direction she wants and there are no boundaries.

But Paul urges the Galatians in their freedom to "stand firm." No singing, twirling or dancing here! 'Stand firm' sounds like digging your heels into *terra firma* and getting ready for battle. What's that all about? We forget, of course, that in "The Sound of Music," for all the marvelous freedom and spontaneity that Maria von Trapp embodied in her spirit, it's what she *did with her freedom* that really counts. She stood for something. She became a mother to seven motherless children. She defied the Nazis.

What do you do with your freedom? Are you an advocate for children? Do you defy political movements that diminish people? Do you love your neighbors?

What do you do with your freedom?

About that freedom. As Christians, we believe we have been set free, or saved, from certain things. From what have we been set free? Anyone?

(suggestions...)

But the things we're saved and set free *from* are only half of the truth. Not only have we been set free *from* certain things, we've also been set free *for* certain things - and no, that does not include doing whatever we feel like doing. We've been saved by love *for* love. That is what our freedom is for: to love. But love is not something we do on our own. Love is a fruit that is born of another power beyond us: The Spirit of God. This fruit becomes embodied in us through faith. So, in faith, we are freed for love *and for* participation in the Spirit from which love comes. And so, Paul says, "live by the Spirit" of God and bear fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. All these fruits, though, are just varieties of love.

This then is the freedom we have in Christ: it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me! And the Christ who bears fruit through me. So, our freedom is not an invitation to trust in human moral intuition or the spontaneity of the human spirit. Our trust is in the purposefulness and the power of God's Spirit that is at work among us. The freedom of our salvation is not a summons to trust in the law and our ability to obey it, but rather to trust in the Spirit where love comes from.

And the Spirit has an opposite, which creates a battleground of sorts. According to this passage today, one of the things we are set free *from* is living life according to the "flesh." This is the yoke of slavery Paul refers to, so in your new freedom, don't go back to living according to the flesh! But what does he mean by this? "Flesh" here is not primarily about sex, by the way, or bodily passions. Flesh means human willfulness, when we live according to our own desires and whims, goals and agendas as opposed to the leading of God's Spirit. Living according to the flesh is slavery because, as human beings, we can't save ourselves, make our lives meaningful or even figure out how to all live together. As Paul puts it: "If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." What you end up with is the human race sort of imploding or cannibalizing itself. Living according to the flesh results in people using, controlling and abusing one another for their own purposes. Look at the world around us. This is the slavery from which God seeks to free us.

Having been freed to live according to the Spirit, we've been freed also from the law – God's law – for the law can do nothing for us. It can't make us good, it can't get us into heaven, it can only condemn us because, try as we might, we will never meet its obligations. So, God through Christ has freed us from its demands. There is literally nothing we can do to be saved. It is a gift of grace, it's free and it makes us free. But many people, right from the start, have misunderstood this gift and taken it as a license to do whatever they want.

But again, that's not why we have been set free, to do whatever we want. The person who can only think of freedom as license to do anything will ask the question, "If I don't have to love my neighbor (after all, I'm forgiven), then why should I love my neighbor?"

"Well, since you put it that way, no reason." If the only motivation you can think of to love your neighbor is to get credit with God, then the idea of love is lost on you.

One of the great Lutheran theologians of our time, Gerhard Forde, once put the question this way: "Now that you don't have to do anything, what is it that you will do?"

A great example of being freed from one thing and for another is found at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina. When the monks were first building the abbey, they found a large granite stone that stood at the intersection of two roads. Curious about the unusual stone, they investigated it and found out that just over a century ago, men, women, and children would stand on that stone and be sold into slavery. The monks took the stone and hollowed out a bowl in the top. They brought it into the chapel to be used as their baptismal font. The engraving on it reads, "Upon this rock, men and women were once sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of baptism, men and women become free children of God."

That is the pivot of salvation: from slavery into freedom as children of God. Our own lives - just like that stone - are living testaments - or can be - to having once been under the yoke of slavery but are now agents of grace and new life.

So, once again, what is it that you will do with your freedom?

Stand firm in your freedom. You have been freed for a purpose. In the great film, "Saving Private Ryan," private Ryan is the subject of a rescue effort on the front lines of the European theatre in WWII. The reason? All his brothers have perished in the war and the army has decided that no mother should have to bear losing all her sons, so they

decide to send a team of soldiers to search him out on the front lines and get him out. They get him out, but in the process, one by one, they die. The last one to die, right before he dies, says to Ryan, "Deserve this." In other words, make your life count. A great price was paid to bring you back, stateside. In the scene I'd like to close with, we see Ryan at the end of the film, his friend has just lost his life, and he ages to the present where he's visiting his friend's grave who gave his life for him. He ponders whether he deserved to be spared. "Have I lived a good life?" he wonders.

(film clip from "Saving Private Ryan")

Surely none of us deserve God laying down his life in Jesus for us. And yet, we are invited to live like we do, like we know which team we are now on. So, stand firm. What does it mean that you live by the Spirit, not by flesh? Amen.