

Pentecost 4C (7/7/2019)

Isaiah 66:10-14

Psalm 66:1-9

Galatians 6:1-16

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Even as we celebrate our freedom, we also acknowledge the ways we are inclined to abuse it. Christian freedom is not total independence from the neighbor, but willing attentiveness to her. Grounded in God's grace for us, freedom is "faith active in love." We exercise true freedom, in other words, when we "bear one another's burdens," and so fulfill Christ's dream for human community.

"My country, 'tis of thee, / Sweet land of liberty, / Of thee I sing; / Land where my fathers died, / Land of the pilgrims' pride, / From ev'ry mountainside / Let freedom ring!" Maybe it's because I have soccer on the brain these days, but I'll forever associate that patriotic verse with the 2010 men's World Cup in South Africa. As I sat with seminary friends at a bar in Chicago to watch the United States face off with England, we belted those lyrics penned by Samuel Francis Smith, which, of course, were set to the music for the British national anthem, "God Save the Queen." This was not lost on the English fans who had found their way to the same venue, nevertheless they graciously endured our singing. It was probably for the best that the match ended in a draw.

Let freedom ring. July 4th marked our annual commemoration of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, the event that set in motion the conflict that would eventually result in the American colonies' liberation from imperial control. Although our Fourth of July celebrations emerge from that specific historical context, political independence has since become conflated with broader notions of freedom. American freedom today has a range of connotations, from individual

constitutional rights to wide open interstate freeways to a general lack of accountability for what we post on social media. **Freedom has largely come to mean personal license, that is, *I ought to be able to do whatever I want whenever I want.***

Consider freedom of speech. We have often mistakenly assumed that the First Amendment right to free speech applies in every circumstance, permitting anyone to say pretty much anything in any arena without constraint. Why, for instance, should a reality TV star lose his contract with a television network over his public stance on a social issue? That's a violation of his right to free speech, isn't it? But, the First Amendment protects only against restrictions of speech by Congress, and, by extension, those who derive their powers from Congress. Private entities are free to impose penalties for speech that doesn't conform to standards that they've set. Freedom of speech, in other words, does not mean freedom from consequences.

That is to say that even as we celebrate our freedom this week, we also acknowledge the ways we are inclined to abuse it. This raises an important question: **What's the difference between freedom and entitlement? Or, to put it another way, what's the difference between a principled exercise of freedom and a careless one?**

"For freedom Christ has set us free," we heard in last Sunday's reading from Galatians, "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another."¹ ***Do not submit to slavery, but become slaves***

¹ Galatians 5:1, 13.

to one another. These verses attest to a Christian understanding of freedom, which is quite different from the conventional understanding.

Martin Luther was enamored with Paul's letter to the Galatians² and deeply committed to the notion of Christian freedom. He wrote his timeless *Treatise on Christian Liberty* in 1520, 250 years before the American colonies revolted. In typically Lutheran fashion, he introduces his discourse with a paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."³ And, from these seemingly contradictory statements, Luther elaborates on what Paul sets out in Galatians, namely that faith is not only a gift of grace, but also the foundation of freedom, or what Luther calls "lordship." **Complete freedom from the power of sin and death makes the person of faith nothing less than a "fellow-king" with Christ.** Forgive the gendered language; all of you who do not identify as male, you, too, are "lords" and "kings."

By no means, however, does this lordship allow for selfishness. On the contrary, Christian freedom is diametrically opposed to self-absorption. For Luther, self-absorption is at the heart of sin. Human nature is corrupted by a state of being *incurvatus in se*, Latin for "curved in on the self." But **the grace of God turns our inward focus outward; it liberates us from self-absorption and "absorbs" us instead in the interests of others.**

It follows that true freedom can be exercised only in relationship. If faith characterizes our relationship to God, then love characterizes our relationship to each other: "I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor," Luther writes,

² See Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 183.

³ John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, 53.

“just as Christ offered himself to me.”⁴ **Real freedom**, in other words, **is faith active in love.**⁵

It’s a compelling alternative to the prevailing notion of freedom. **Freedom is not total independence from the neighbor, but willing attentiveness to her; it releases us from captivity to our own interests for the sake of compassion.**

“Bear one another’s burdens,” Paul writes in our reading from Galatians today, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

Why is it, after all, that people go out of their way to help strangers, even when they don’t expect to see them again? Why do people reach out to other people’s children, even when little ones require extra patience and care? Why do people give generously to their churches, even when they don’t benefit directly from a given ministry? These are exercises in Christian freedom, the natural response to God’s boundless grace, by which we shed our inhibitions and share the responsibility for our collective well-being.

Dear church, **Christ gives himself completely to us, withholding nothing. So, we give thanks to God and we give ourselves to one another. This is the essence of the “new creation” that God brings about in the cross and resurrection, that followers of Christ die to ourselves and become signs of resurrection for others.** So, as you celebrate your freedom again this month, take Paul’s words to heart: “let us not grow weary in doing what is right... [but] whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...”

⁴ Ibid. 75.

⁵ See Galatians 5:6.