

June 30, 2019 • Third Sunday after Pentecost

“Freedom in the Spirit”

Sermon by Nathan Oney



Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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 slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 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. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Summer is one of my favorite times of the year. It conjures up happy memories from childhood, of long days stretching into warm, late nights. Of summer road-trips across the country to places full of possibility. Of my Grandma’s house on the lake, and innocent time spent playing on the water. Of shooting and watching fireworks as we celebrated freedom on Independence Day every July fourth.

In some ways, the summers of my childhood left me with fonder memories even than Christmas. The time was freer. I was free to explore out on my own, free to get into trouble, free to make my own way.

My grandma’s house was a property on a cove of Grand Lake in Oklahoma, and there was a particularly steep, wooded embankment just out of view from her expansive front porch. It was a favorite spot of mine to explore. Secluded, mysterious, dangerous. As I ventured into this area one summer day, I stumbled down the side, nearly falling into the water.

I panicked, I couldn’t get back up on my own. I started to wonder how long I would be trapped. An hour? All day? All night? ... Less than five minutes later, my dad came to check on me, and pulled me up to safety. Though I had such freedom, my parents were always keeping an eye on me from afar, ready to rescue me from the consequences of my youthful curiosity.

How I long for those days of freedom without responsibility. Now days, the responsibilities of life seem so great, and even overwhelming from time to time. My generation has a term for this: “Adulthood.” Adulthood is “the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks.”¹ It is usually used as a humorous attempt to point out how responsibilities ruin the fun. We might use it in a sentence such as: “Coffee: because adulthood is hard.”

Paul, in our reading from Galatians today, finds himself once again urging new Christians to use our freedoms responsibly. Freedom without responsibility, he says, isn’t really true freedom at all. “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 slaves to one another.”

“You were called to freedom,” he says, channeling his inner William Wallace. “You were called to freedom!” And... that means becoming slaves to one another!

I don’t know about you but I think that I speak for most people when I say that freedom and slavery are usually opposites. In our history in this country, we have held freedom—liberty—higher than any other value. We have held it higher than peace. We have fought wars in the name of independence and self-determination. And, as we remember the words of Patrick Henry, we have held it higher even than life; “Give me liberty, or give me death!”

Freedom is the cornerstone of democracy. The lack of it is a stain on any society. Our failures to extend it to everyone at the founding of our country is a travesty, and we still have much work to do to ensure that all people, both within our borders and all over the earth are free. Freedom is an ideal that we hold to as a thing to be desired.

But it strikes me just how often our own sense of personal freedom quickly turns self-centered and harmful. Paul saw it happening over and over again in his churches, just as we see it happening today. Paul saw the freedoms that he spoke of--freedom from sin, freedom from the law, freedom from judgement—and writes “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” In the letter to the Romans, he puts it another way: “Well then, since God’s grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not!” Paul knew that our nature as human beings is to take all that we can, every inch of freedom, to use it for ourselves.

We can use our own freedom to take away freedom from others. We can use our freedom to engage in biting and devouring, and we can consume one another in the process. Because if we are indeed free, we are free to follow our basest instincts toward self-indulgence. We see this all the time. We see those who use their freedom to hoard resources for themselves as they consume and consume. We see those who use freedom as a way to isolate themselves from others and from responsibility over the way that their actions affect others.

Freedom isn’t merely our own personal license to determine for ourselves the actions which we wish to take. True freedom in and through Christ is so much more. It is liberation. Liberation from the small-minded thinking that fails to see beyond ourselves and our tribe.

¹ Google Smart Results

Liberation from the prison of “me first, us first.” To live in the freedom of the Spirit is to move beyond ourselves for the sake of the Gospel. To be truly free is not to be free from responsibility, but FOR responsibility.

To have true freedom is to follow the one who was himself the most free—the Son of God—who had all things, and “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.” That is freedom.

Freedom and responsibility. That is what it means to be an adult: to live with freedom, never shirking the responsibilities that come with it. This shouldn't be a surprise for any of us, even when “adulthood” seems overwhelming, because there is grace built in. The word “adulthood” comes from, of course, the same word as adult, which traces its origins back to ancient Latin word “adolescere,” which means “to grow to maturity.” It doesn't mean being perfect. It doesn't mean that we get everything right, or that we never make mistakes, but that we are getting there. We are growing, by the grace of God.

Growing into love.

Growing into maturity.

Growing into who God created each and every one of us to be.

God created you to have life and to have it abundantly. God created us to love and to be loved. And God has given us freedom for freedom that we might have that life by the spirit and that we might know the love of God in the world around us.

Freedom in Christ is freedom that we might grow.

Nobel Literature Prize-winner Albert Camus put it this way: “Freedom is nothing else but a chance to be better.”

Adolescere: “To grow to maturity.” John Wesley often called it “Christian Perfection,” but the meaning is the same: that we each can only hope with confidence that we as children of God might become who God has created us to be: perfected in love through the example and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” Paul writes. “If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say.” Paul reminds us in the words of Jesus that we have been made by God into one human family, united forever in God's love, and that if we do only one thing in this life, it must be to love our neighbors. To love each other as ourselves because there is really only one love: God's love, and us, God's children growing into it.

I think of our youth service project team in Smith River, California. This week has surely been a trying one as they spend more time together than they ever have. Every mission trip from my youth—and so I assume every mission trip ever—experiences some not insignificant amount of what Paul in our reading calls “biting and devouring.” We all get tired. We need our own space. Our ability to maintain our love for each other moment by moment will falter from time to time. But the youth this week have also done something beautiful. They are working, building, not so that they can win God's approval or earn salvation—we already have that—but so they can grow to maturity. There is a list of characteristics of a mature Christian written on the wall up in the youth room, and indeed in many youth rooms across the world. It says: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Do you know someone who has this fruit in their lives? Someone who lives by the spirit and is guided by the spirit? Someone who is first formed by the very love of God and shows it to all people? Who has joy, even in the small things in life, and who finds it even in the midst of sorrow? Who works for peace, both within themselves and in the world—peace, not as the world gives but as Christ gives? Someone who has patience, who doesn't get angry when she has to wait or when the L.A. traffic is moving too slow? Who shows kindness to those who are good to her, and mercy to those who have wronged her? Who gives generously from her time and resources, for the betterment of others, and who shows generosity to herself, not depriving herself of the things that she needs? Who is faithful in all things, praising God and seeking diligently after God's plan for her? Who acts with gentleness, not harshness, when correcting others and when receiving correction? Who has self-control, not reacting from a place of fear when troubles come, but responding with grace to whatever surprises may meet her?

Do you know her? Do you find her in the church? In our country? In yourself?

The fruit of the Spirit. The freedom to be who God made us to be is sustained by the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which we gain access to not by our own efforts, but by honestly and diligently seeking after God, the creator of all good things.

There is a saying about growing fruit. You can plant the seed, but only God can make the rain to fall and the sun to shine. We work together with God and with each other through the community of the church in order to cultivate fruit in our lives.

This Independence Day, I give thanks for the freedoms that we have in this country, even as I long for freedom and justice to flourish even more. And as we celebrate, I give thanks for the freedom of religion: that we have the right to worship or not to worship as we see fit. But today, let us not use our freedoms that we have in this country and the freedom that is only found in Christ as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but always and everywhere to make known the love of God through the fruit that we bear as the church.

To God be all honor and glory forever. Amen.