

Called to Freedom and Love
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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Galatians 5:1 and 13-25

(New Living Translation)

Freedom in Christ

¹ So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

¹³ For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. ¹⁴ For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another.

Living by the Spirit's Power

¹⁶ So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. ¹⁷ The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. ¹⁸ But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

¹⁹ When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. ²⁵ Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.

The Sermon

On the bulletin cover you'll see the words, "Freedom Found Here."

What a fantastic affirmation of our goal at CDA First Presbyterian Church, and our calling as part of the body of Christ's Church.

Also, however, what an incredible challenge it is – and will continue to be – for this congregation to live up to this claim.

An incredible challenge, because we – like the first century folk in the churches in Galatia – are prone to find freedom too challenging, and to be seduced too easily by voices calling us to be more rigorous in this element of our theology, speak with more certainty about that contemporary social issue, trumpet more boldly how great we are, and so on and so forth ad infinitum.

The Apostle Paul couldn't be more clear.

Using first century rhetorical practices, he tells the Galatians to shape up and get back to the basic gospel premises which he has received through his encounters with the Spirit of the Living Christ, which boil down to this:

If you were not born Jewish, you only need Christ to be reconciled to God and to become part of the family of God.

You don't, for heaven's sake, have to also become Jewish, and to abide by the Jewish practices of circumcision, dietary laws and customs, and all the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" of the Torah, with the following exception:

You do have to follow the law as it is summarized in the words, "Love God, Love Neighbor, and Love Self."

And that's where this "Freedom" bit becomes scary, and so difficult to live out.

Being free in biblical terms, does not mean to be a hedonistic libertarian and declare, "It's all about me, baby!"

Being free in New Testament biblical terms means being free of the sin disease, so you don't have to worry about all that baggage when it comes to your salvation, but the resulting freedom from sin and guilt is meant to release your energy and focus into discovering just how to love God, neighbor, and self in God-pleasing ways.

We have the model of Jesus, but it seems that most of us who proclaim to be Christian really don't believe we are called to be as freed up as Jesus apparently was.

Instead we hire or train people to – on our behalf – touch the untouchable, love the unlovable, put up with the seemingly unforgivable, and maybe even to hang out with those whose lives really aren't all that righteous to begin with.

Sing praises to God and Jesus? We can do that.

Come to worship on Sundays – at least when we can get here? We can do that.

Read our Bibles regularly? Well, our intentions are good.

Pray – When we can find the time, right?

Visit the sick – Will a card or a phone call suffice?

Visit those in prison – Whoa, that's a biggie – there are bad people in those places.

Associate with others who don't believe as we do – Won't we get tainted?

Show love and respect for those whose lifestyles and life choices offend us –
“Come on Pastor, get real!”

This freedom business is hard work, folks, especially when we come to realize that Paul isn't even writing about individual freedom, but rather about the collective freedom of the community of faith.

When Paul writes in Galatians 5:13 “For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters,” in the Greek the “you” is plural. In essence, Paul deals with the individual only in the context of the corporate life of the Christian community.

So the hooker is, “We are free so we can be accountable!”

And, folks, isn't that what maturity is all about?

During my time at Whitworth, each year a female colleague and I taught a course on human sexuality. That led to invitations to speak to church youth groups in the area, for either or both middle school and high school-aged youth.

Good golly were those kids honest, once they figured out that you were trustworthy and not simply there to give the party line.

Almost always the following question would come up from one or more of the girls: “My boyfriend says that if I love him, it's okay to have sex. Is that true?”

The best response I could come up with was, “It is true that this is what your boyfriend thinks, but teenage boys are not the best guide to morality. What do you think and believe, and do you feel you trust yourself enough at this age to make decisions that will potentially affect the rest of your life?”

I'd add, “And remember, your decisions don't just affect you, they affect everyone who knows you, cares about you, and loves you.”

In our text for today, the Apostle Paul is saying essentially the same thing. When Paul writes in For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love, he is reinforcing the communal nature of the Christian faith.

We live in an era – and as citizens of North Idaho we reside in an area that is big on individual freedom and liberty. We are also just one Sunday away from the 4th of July which is also focused on the freedom and liberty we enjoy as American citizens.

May we also remember that we have a primary loyalty – if we choose to claim the name Christian – to freedom in and through Christ, which challenges us in distinctive ways to render a primary allegiance to Kingdom of God values.