

The Law of Christ
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
July 4, 2010
Independence Day

Text: Galatians 5:25-6:2

New Revised Standard Version

^{5:25} If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

^{6:1} My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

The Sermon

We have come to a Sunday when a national holiday of great significance, that celebrates the founding of a country on the principles of freedom, overlaps with a worship service with a challenge to share a message and a belief that transcends any one nation.

That this creates a daunting challenge for any minister is accurate. It would be far more easy to focus simply on patriotism and hail the freedoms we enjoy as Americans, or to simply focus on the biblical lesson for the day, then to try to speak to both, but opportunities to worship – and to worship as citizens of a particular nation – are too important to take the easy road.

And so I'll jump in, by saying that freedom was at the heart of the biblical story centuries before it became the heart of what our nation promotes.

I'll also quickly add that freedom was no easier for the people of Israel or for those in the early church to embrace, than it is for our time and place in history.

The story of the exodus from bondage in Egypt is followed by story upon story of how willing the recently-freed were to re-embrace bondage. Being truly free was just too daunting a task.

The story of the Book of Galatians is how individuals in congregations established by the Apostle Paul on the basis of freedom in Christ, were being seduced by those who said they needed Christ and the law.

The Apostle Paul had built his entire mission to the Gentiles on the theme that the self-giving gift of Jesus Christ superceded the need to seek salvation through Torah compliance.

Not long after Paul had left these congregations to minister elsewhere, Jewish Christian missionaries moved in to say to these new converts, "Paul was wrong.

You need Christ and you need to become Jewish to be acceptable to God.

The Missionaries' message that the Law must provide ordered governance for the community was powerfully appealing to the Galatians because it tapped into a deep and persistent human need for rules and structure. We humans tend to fear that without firm guidelines we will fall into chaos, and the Missionaries brought a gospel that answered this felt need.

Sisters and brothers in Christ I declare to you that missionaries within, and missionaries without consistently bring this message to this and every church.

Concerns about freedom in our nation are no different, and there will always be those who seek to define our distinctive way of freedom too narrowly, or too broadly – too personally or too collectively to the violation of personal freedom.

Paul's answer to his beloved churches was to challenge them to the collective responsibility that true freedom requires.

Paul offered freedom in and through Christ, recognizing that it only came by means of following what he labeled the "Law of Christ."

Freedom and law are not incompatible, when the "law" is about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Freedom and law are not incompatible when you learn that even though you may be "legally" free to ignore your neighbor's needs, you will not be "truly" free until you love and serve your neighbor as you would yourself.

Paul couldn't be more clear when it comes to collective accountability in love.

Listen again to today's text:

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Hammering home legal dictates is safe and secure.

Holding each other accountable in gentleness and love is anything but secure.

But that is our charge, both as people of faith and as citizens of our great nation.

May the Spirit lead us as we humbly seek to fulfill Christ's law of love.

Amen.