

Sermon, July 3, 2022
Galatians 5:1 - 13-25

“Christ Has Set Us Free”

Tomorrow is the 4th of July, Independence Day, a time to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the birth of a nation. The Declaration tells us that all are created equal, and that we hold the Rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness - rights that are to be cherished and protected. In this morning's reading we are also informed that in Christ we are free. If you were to read verses 2-12 you would see that Paul is once more dealing with a congregation divided and bickering over the issue of circumcision and the church's relationship to the law, which he appears to equate with “a yoke of slavery”. Then beginning in verse 13 he insists that their newfound freedom should not be used for self-indulgence, but encouragement for loving one another. He says that the whole of the law is summed up in the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself”. But what does it mean to love one's neighbor, and who is our neighbor?

The word neighbor actually is derived from a word meaning “near-dweller”, but I think it is clear that Paul and Jesus have a different understanding of the word. In particular, Jesus makes this clear when a lawyer asks him “Who is my neighbor?”, and Jesus replies with his parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man is lying in a ditch having been beaten near to death by robbers. A priest and a Levite both see the man and walk on by. Then a Samaritan comes along, bandages up the man, takes him to an inn, and cares for him. Jesus then asks the lawyer which of the three was a neighbor to the man beaten by the robbers, and he replies, “The one who showed him mercy”. Notice that Jesus didn't exactly answer the lawyer's question. He had asked who his neighbor was, but Jesus' story is about how to be a neighbor. It is left open for us to understand that the man who was beaten and robbed, i.e., someone in need, is also the neighbor. It is also significant that Jesus uses a Samaritan - someone despised by his people - as the hero of the story. It tells us that the things that divide us are meaningless when it comes to the question of who our neighbor is. Our neighbors are not those who simply live nearby. They are essentially all of those that we encounter both near and far, particularly, those who are burdened in one way or another. In our contemporary age of high-speed travel and communication, our neighborhood extends globally.

In the 22nd chapter of the Gospel of Matthew a group of Pharisees ask Jesus what is the greatest commandment? He replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and the second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor

as yourself". It is important to see that these two commandments are tied together - that they are inseparable. To love God does not simply mean to have feelings of affection for God. To love God is to do the will of God, and to do God's will can only lead to love for one's neighbor - and, to love one's neighbor is to love God!

All of this should point to the fact that love stands at the center of the freedom we have in Christ.

Paul continues on to speak of the distinction between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. By life in the flesh, he is not talking specifically about bodily existence, but, rather, various attitudes and ways of living, such as licentiousness, anger, enmity, jealousy, dissensions, etc. Notice that these things are not only harmful to the individual but can have a disastrous effect upon the Beloved Community. I have seen such things tear a church apart.

On the flip side Paul describes a life in the Spirit bearing the fruit of love, which contains within, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - all things that benefit the life of the individual, and also brings life to the Beloved Community.

The 4th of July is not only our celebration of our Independence. It is also the anniversary of the day that Henri David Thoreau moved into his little house on Walden Pond. This may not carry much significance for you, but as a full-fledged member of the Thoreau Society, based in Concord, Massachusetts, it does for me. One of my favorite quotes from his great book, Walden: or Life in the Woods, is, "It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake, and there is a dawn in me." I was thrilled the first time I read that line. Admittedly, I am not a morning person. I am at my most energized and creative late at night. I've often said I could be one of the best preachers in the country if only we held our Sunday service at 11 o'clock at night. But, of course, that was not really what Thoreau was getting at. A little further on he says that "To be awake is to be alive." By being awake, he is not talking about coming out of sleep, but, rather, to be aroused to a new and different way of being in the world, of coming out of an existential slumber, of being truly alive. I raise this up because I see this as being akin to what Paul means about "life in the Spirit". To find ourselves awakened in the Spirit of Christ opens the door to a different way of being in the world, to find deeper meaning and purpose, to not only be more alive, but to experience the true meaning of freedom! Amen.

Let us pray: God, ever loving and kind, we thank you for this day that you have given us, and for all you fill it with. We thank you especially for the depths of your love and ask that you help us to bear witness to that love in all that we say and do. Keep us ever mindful of who our neighbor is and lead us to be good neighbors as well.

Lord, on this holiday weekend we celebrate the freedoms that we have and help us keep from letting them slip away. We also offer thanksgiving for the freedom we find in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to use that freedom wisely, and for the benefit of others. Lead us to be the people, and the church you would have us be.

On this day we offer prayers for those who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, and ask for comfort and peace of mind for those who mourn... Amen.