

# THE COST OF FREEDOM

Psalm 22: 19-28; Gal. 3: 23-29

“You are heirs to the promise.” It is a declaration of freedom – of belonging. It’s a welcome. Paul is connecting us to the past through these little words written to the church in Galatia. And there was great celebration.

This weekend, we celebrate our freedom as Americans, a time when we became known as a sovereign nation, free to worship as the spirit would guide us and free from tyranny of the past. Those who came declared that we would establish our own laws, no longer answerable to a government far away.

It’s interesting that some people powerfully object to any celebration of this or any secular holiday in the Christian church, and yet it was the Christian church that actually established these celebrations. It was always about religious freedom. It was a separation of church and state alright, but the separation was to assure that the state would no longer be in charge of religious affairs, rites and rituals.

We live in and of the world, and religion and our nation are closely intertwined. This weekend, we spend this time giving thanks to God for the freedom we enjoy and have maintained throughout these centuries. As Christians however, this 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration is a reminder that we have even more responsibilities. For us, freedom does not mean that we can just do anything we want. If we want to follow Christ, then it means much more. Through this holiday, we ask ourselves: “What do we do to live in Christ?” Paul described it this morning.

Paul deals with freedom in Christ versus captivity under the old law of Moses. Paul identifies himself, brings a greeting and then gets right to the point. He turns from a greeting to a sense of sadness. He says, “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from him who called you to a different Gospel.”

Paul is worried. He realizes that experiencing Christ has turned their world upside down, yet there is a battle going on behind the scenes between the fundamentalist Orthodox Jews who are threatened by the new wave of religious fellowship, and the Revisionists, the visionaries of their day. You see, these early Jewish followers saw Jesus as the continuation of their own story – the Messiah they had been expecting. They were not establishing a new religion, rather incorporating Jesus into their own story as the fulfillment of the words of the prophets and leaders of old. That’s why we see parallel stories of Jesus and Moses, Elijah and others as they share the stories and traditions as they had always done. It’s called the Midrash tradition and gave credence to their belief.

These early followers, not yet even known as Christians, saw themselves as reformers. Much like later theologians like Martin Luther who attempted to reform Catholicism; they felt the need to review the rites and rituals and preconceived rules now that Gentiles were also joining them. The old rules had been replaced and updated by Jesus’ new way of love and acceptance rather than the performance of certain deeds.

By this time, however, they were tiring. As we all know, change is difficult and it’s sometimes easier to slip back in the old way rather than moving forward. So we find Paul addressing an argument about whether a person must first fulfill the rules of becoming a Jew before they can become a follower. Did Gentile men need to be circumcised as prescribed in the torah? Did men and women have to know and obey all the laws before joining?

Paul is impatient and actually becomes angry and confronts them. He wants to know why they have listened to some who have preached this message in direct conflict with Paul’s earlier message. He asks, “Did you receive the spirit by the words of the law or by hearing the faith through Christ?”

He reminds them that there was a time when the law was the “pedagogas” or disciplinarian. This was a word they all understood that literally identified a male slave that protected a boy from harm and taught him to behave properly.

The slave could even punish the boy for misbehaving but the role was temporary. Once the boy reached maturity, the slave was no longer needed. Paul used that word to describe the old law. He’s telling them that once Christ came, there was a new way of living. It was now about faith in God, belief, knowing, recognizing God’s presence in their lives that would make them children of God.

While we may be more comfortable with the old ways, living in Christ is NOT about obeying certain rules and rituals. It's about love. Following proper rules at prosper times does not bring us into relationship with God. It is much more! Paul said it through Jesus' message, "We are not justified by the works of the law."

Finally, Paul releases us from all the prejudices, all the old stereotypes and speaks in radical, heart stopping words: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. You are all one in Christ Jesus." Did you notice? We're still fighting these same ideological battles in the year 2010. Who is right? Which is the right way? When are we going to realize that heritage doesn't matter; economic status doesn't matter; gender doesn't matter.

In that world so long ago, can you just imagine the faces of those followers when they received Paul's letter. These were shocking, life-changing, tradition-changing words. In a sense, Paul was making null and void all the pretenses of the past. He was saying to the elite; "Do you think only Jews can go into the inner court of the temple? No more! Jews and Greeks and every color and gender and race should now be accepted. Slaves are free and welcome. You say women should not own property, but act as chattel to be bought and sold? No more! Men and women are both invited to be baptized and clothed in Christ. In God's kingdom, there is no hierarchy. In Christ's Church, there is no hierarchy. We are all equal here.

This past week, as John Dale and I were planning worship and talking about the Church and how we work together, we talked about what we might do as staff members of this church to somehow address the issue of equality among the various boards and committees in the church. Somehow over the years, some Boards have been perceived as being more important than others and nothing can be more destructive or bring more conflict than for that to happen. Every single Board and Committee in Christ's Church must be perceived as equal in power and authority and importance. It's the only way the Church can work. It's the only way we all work together to bring about God's Kingdom through Christ. Every Board, every Committee has a particular task – but if we are not working together as a team, the Church will fail. That's true in society as well. If we as Americans do not work together for the good of all, then we will fail.

Yes, we have much work to do before we will know the reality of equality for all. But today my brother Randy, a former U.S. Marine will stand with another representative to lower and then raise the US flag at a cemetery service. As taps are played, my brother representing the U S Marines, a young woman from the US Navy, a middle aged Hispanic man will represent the Coast Guard, and stately African American man will represent the US Army and a pregnant US Air Force helicopter pilot will touch the lines of that flag with mutual respect. What a sight it will be!!! When speaking to my brother, I asked him if it was deliberate that so many different ethnic backgrounds were chosen. There are churches where only men can act as ushers or serve on Boards. Whenever I hear of a denominational struggle, I can't help but think that of all the organizations in the world, how can the Christian church still be debating?

Even the Hebrew scriptures, celebrated the joining of one great congregation to worship God as we read in the Psalm this morning. Yet, even today the church often acts as a deterrent and judge rather than bringing peace and justice into the church and world. Perhaps like those early followers, we too are confused. We hear opinions from every side. Perhaps Paul's words are not about instruction in behavior, but rather a prescription for our spirit.

As free human beings, we come to the table of the Lord today with a true sense of the spirit of Christ. We feel the entrance of the bread and the fruit of the vine into our bodies and we celebrate. As we celebrate our freedom, could we also celebrate this opportunity to actually hear the still, small voice of Christ?

If equality and justice and the love of Jesus are to be ours to spread to the world, perhaps the lessons shared so long ago can actually lead our way as well. We are all heirs." Heirs to the kingdom of God. Isn't that reason for celebration! Amen.

Sermon preached by;  
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