



Sermon

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 / Matthew 5: 43-48
5th Sunday After Pentecost
July 5, 2009 – July 4th Weekend
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Picking Freedom's Fruits

There is something quite special about being the preacher at St. George's on July 4th weekend. Here we are in Old City, Philadelphia, within the boundaries of what the Independence Hall National Park calls "the most historic square mile in American History." Gathering here around the *THE* national holiday, is like being at Plymouth Rock for Thanksgiving, Paris for Bastille Day, Bethlehem for Christmas, or Punxsutawney, Pa. for Ground Hog Day.

OK, I may have gone a bit too far with that last one.

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The heart and soul words of the Declaration of Independence were formed and first proclaimed a matter of blocks from here. They must have been the talk of our forebears in the Methodist Society meeting here, especially since John Wesley told the fledgling American Methodists to cool-it, as far as any bad behavior towards their King and Mother England were concerned.

When the Continental Congress declared separation from Great Britain 233 years ago, liberty was in the air. But the idea of freedom did not originate with them. In every age, around the world, people have sought what the inscription on the Liberty Bell, quoting the Hebrew Scriptures proclaims: "... liberty throughout the land unto to all the inhabitants thereof." (Lev. 25:10)

Human history is the story of people living-into freedom. Thousands of years before John Hancock's "John Hancock" signed the Declaration of Independence, the foundational stories of Judeo-Christian tradition say God's people, enslaved in Egypt, were inspired to freedom. God sent a man named Moses who demanded of Pharaoh's regime, "Let my people go." When Pharaoh and company refused, God's Spirit stirred, the Hebrews escaped and then sojourned 40 struggling years to find freedom's way to the Promised Land.

A thousand years or so later, the Christian story tells about people oppressed by the principalities and powers of an occupying force – the Roman Empire. Again God's people yearned for freedom and deliverance. When Bethlehem born, Nazareth reared, God-sent Jesus of Nazareth spoke his inaugural sermon, he said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim liberty to captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free... Now is the time." (*Luke 4:18-20*)

Yearning for freedom... Living into freedom...

A woman I know was part of a church group that traveled to South Africa in 1992 to monitor the first free elections in the apartheid dismantled new South Africa. Suzanne Moeller painted a picture to share the experience with the people back home. Her picture shows a line of black South Africans stretching as far as her eyes could see. They were standing in line to vote. She will never forget people weeping as they came to cast a ballot, previously denied them, in

their motherland. People carried others who couldn't walk! How they must have felt the release and liberty Moses led and Jesus preached.

The idea of freedom stirs not only in human hearts and minds; it also streams from the heart of God. Like Paul says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (*II Cor. 3:17*)

Freedom. The word rolls off our tongues so easily.

Misunderstanding freedom is nothing new. In the reading from Galatians come powerful words about freedom: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only does not use freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. The whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14, *The Message*)

These words were born of a serious conflict with divisive extremes in a church, in Galatia where good, well meaning people were trying to work out what it means to be free.

One faction believed freedom was license to do as you pleased. If it feels good do it, if it doesn't, DON'T. If God is supposed to set human spirits free then a person ought to be able to do as she/he pleases. Now you know why Paul, who helped to start this church, said: "God has called you to a free life, just be sure you don't use freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and [then] destroy freedom. Rather use freedom to serve one another. Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom." (Galatians 5:13-14, *The Message*)

The other faction believed it was imperative to strictly adhere to the requirements of religious ritual, the most significant ritual being circumcision. This group's perspective was that in order for a Gentile to embrace this new fangled Christian way of relating to God, circumcision was a required. In effect, in this men-are-the-only-ones-who-really-matter church, one needed to become a Jew before becoming Christian. Freedom is all well and good, these folks

reasoned, but if you don't have rules to live by, and you don't live by those rules the whole house will crumble. Now you know why Paul is so passionate in saying that merely observing ritual or holding to tradition for tradition sake misses the point. The thing that truly matters is faith working through love.

Faith working through love. Now there's something we Methodists should know about – It's what got the movement started. It's what puts "the method" in Methodist. It was the impetus for the Wesleyan revival in the rational, 'heady,' Church of England of the 18th century – a yearning for what we hold to about a God of love to get busy in our lives! The mark of a Methodist, wrote John Wesley, defending the movement from criticism, "is the love of God shed abroad in his heart..."

We live in a time when faith is defined and determined by faction as much as by faith liberated through love. There are the so-called 'culture wars,' the red states and blue states of national politics and religious reckoning, even in our own denomination. One also hears Jesus trying to build a bridge across the divide: "You've heard it said: Hate your enemies and love your friends. What I'm telling you is let antagonists bring out the best in you, the God-centered self in you." (Matthew 5: 43-48)

One can also hear Abraham Lincoln echoing both Paul and Jesus as he appealed to a fractured country calling for "the better angels of our nature."

Freedom's struggles in national and religious realms have gone on for a long time. The exhibits from the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall and the Constitution center suggest each new generation must learn liberty and freedom's lessons afresh in and for their time. A key insight the Christian perspective offers, as heard in the testimony of the scriptures today, is how liberty's vital center is found in serving others above self.

Says Nelson Mandela, now in his 90's, one who spent more than half his years a political prisoner for his activism for freedom long denied people of

color in his homeland, “to be free is to not merely cast off chains, but to live in a way that enhances the freedom of others.”

To be free is to be liberated from the prison of “me, myself and I.” To be free is to be able to move beyond oneself and into the risk to love, to give oneself freely. The first question freedom asks is *NOT* “what’s in it for me?” To be free is to be free *FOR* responsibility not from responsibility.

People saw this freedom in Jesus of Nazareth. The early church sang a hymn about Jesus, with reverence: “though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave.” (Philippians 2: 6-11) That’s what freedom looks like and how freedom acts.

Living into this kind of freedom, individuals, church or nation, we are works in progress. We must never forget this. We may fall short of the ideals offered us in the scriptures and by our forebears, but as Martin Luther King said about “the arc of history being bent towards justice,” so the arc of history bends towards freedom. Living into freedom as God’s people and Americans, here are some things I hope we will be at the forefront of our arching towards freedom and justice for all:

First, if we are looking for the enemies of freedom, let us take-on poverty, injustice, disease, violence, illiteracy, discrimination and intolerance instead of the enemies most often held out to us. Strange, isn’t it? What gets us excited as a nation, what renews patriotism is naming an enemy. Isn’t patriotism more than that? Attacked at Pearl Harbor or on September 11, 2001, patriotic fervor grew out of our need to disparage and destroy a foe. What united us was a common enemy. On the other hand patriotism plummets when there is not a war or enemy on the horizon. I wonder if nations don’t manufacture enemies to pump and prop patriotism. If we need adversaries let us take-on poverty, injustice, disease, violence, illiteracy, discrimination, intolerance and the like terrorizing God’s offer of abundant life.

Second, freedom is about building people up, not tearing people down. At times in our history, most notably among women, African Americans, Native Americans and other aliens come to our shores the rules are manipulated to hold people down. Though people of faith have affirmed others as children of God, we are also well aware – and need to confess and repent – we have also been an accomplice in discrimination and oppression. For all that, God’s word and God’s people have been at the heart of the struggle for liberty and justice for all. The point is, as God’s people and Americans, we strive to build people up, to affirm that every person, regardless of skin color, gender, sexual orientation, genealogy, nationality, class or level of education IS made the image and likeness of God. If we believe any less about any of God’s people, then we’ll treat them that way – as lesser.

The good news is the gap between the challenging realities and the ideals about freedom, seemingly insurmountable sometimes, is the very gap where God’s Spirit stirs new life and bears fruit. To a church in Galatia, fighting to understand freedom, Paul called forth God’s Spirit and named its fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. (*Galatians 5:22, RSV*)

May these vital signs of the Spirit be seen in us as “people under God.”

God set us free from faith and hope in lesser things.

God set us free from narrow self interest to ever widening circles of grace.

God set us free to believe that none of us are free until we all are free.

God set us free to live and work for the freedom that is in your heart for all.

■■■ Amen ■■■