

## ***“Real Freedom”***

*Isaiah 58:6-12 • Galatians 5:1-14*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 28, 2015

Next Saturday is the Fourth of July and so all over the US, we will be celebrating the birth of our nation. Of course we celebrate in a number of ways. A recent survey indicated that 61% of Americans would be celebrating by having a cookout or picnic. The National Hot Dog and Sausage Council tells us that on average Americans consume about 150 million hot dogs on July 4<sup>th</sup> alone and I suspect some of you will try to do your part in reaching that number.

Yet, sadly, many Americans today have completely forgotten why we celebrate at all. For many, it's just another day off from work to cook out, maybe watch some fireworks or hit the road on vacation. School children no longer study our nation's founding documents, and in a recent survey of 14000 college students around the country by the University of Connecticut, only 46% correctly identified the phrase, “we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal” as coming from the Declaration of Independence.

We take freedom for granted in our country and over the years we have come to misunderstand what freedom is really all about. Today we view liberty as our personal freedom *from* other people. A few years ago there was a television commercial for a credit card company that I think captures our understanding of freedom. They used a song from the Rolling Stones with the lyrics, “I'm free to do what I want any old time.” The message was if you get this credit card, you too will be free to do what you want, any old time. The problem is, that's not really freedom. The so-called freedom offered by a credit card can lead to debt and bondage.

This past week I was with our Scout Troop in Arkansas and had the opportunity, along with Sam Clark, to lead a group of boys on a canoe trek down the Buffalo National River. As we went along there was this tremendous feeling of freedom. We could paddle if we wanted, we could stop if we wanted, we camped

where we wanted. We could do whatever we wanted. But then it occurred to me. We weren't free at all. We HAD to go the direction of the river. We were slaves to the river.

True liberty must always be defended against its two great enemies – legalism and license. Up to this point in his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul has been fighting against the threat of legalism. Here at the beginning of chapter 5 he says, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Some Jewish Christian teachers had come into the area and were trying to convince the Galatian Christians that they must follow Jewish law to be saved and so Paul is strongly opposing this legalism.

But beginning in 5:13, Paul shifts to the other threat to liberty -- license. As Philip Ryken, the president of Wheaton College writes, license is freedom taken to its immoral extreme. Where legalism demands responsibility without freedom, license gives freedom without responsibility. I'm free to do what I want, any old time.

But verse 13 says, “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.” The flesh, or sinful nature here refers to that part of us that does not want what God wants. It's the unspiritual side of us, that part that is inclined to sin. Notice that Paul is writing to Christians. He's writing to people who have already been justified by faith in Jesus. Every one of us has this constant battle between the Spirit and the flesh. Between doing what God wants and what we want. There are many who consider themselves Christians who convince themselves that if they have been justified before God by Jesus Christ, then it doesn't matter how much they sin. But the truth is that anyone who uses freedom to indulge the flesh is not really free at all. In John 8:34 Jesus says, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” In Christ we are free **from** sin, not free **to** sin.

Yet being set free from sin by Christ is only the beginning. After warning us not to use our freedom to indulge our sinful nature, Paul tells us “through love serve one another.” Here the Greek is even stronger when it literally says, “become slaves of one another.”

You see, not only did Christ bring us freedom from something, sin, but also freedom *for* something, serving one another. Freedom always has a cost and the founding fathers of our country understood clearly that freedom meant being free to serve one another. They knew that for all of us to be free meant we have a claim on one another. The Declaration of Independence ends this way:

*“for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”*

The men who signed the Declaration of Independence knew that by signing they were essentially signing their death warrants. But they counted the costs and knew that true freedom was only possible in Christ and that it meant serving one another and their fellow countrymen. Benjamin Franklin commented, “we must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

The signers of the Declaration indeed fulfilled their pledge of their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. Although many of the signers lived to be quite old – Charles Carrol of Maryland was the last to die, in 1832 at the age of 95 – and many went on to prominent positions in the new government or in their state governments, yet still many others sacrificed everything they had.

What would cause these men to pledge everything to one another? They understood that Christ’s freedom is a freedom to serve one another. The Apostle Paul summarizes here in our passage when he says “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

But the freedom we have in our country pales in comparison to the freedom we have in Christ. Our freedom in Jesus cost God everything. As Philippians 2 says, although Jesus was in very nature God, he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant” Likewise, as we seek to grow to become more like Christ every day, we see that as we are freed from the bondage of sin we become free to serve one another.

So what does it mean, in practical terms to serve one another in love? Martin Luther wrote that it means,

“performing unimportant works such as the following:  
teaching the erring;  
comforting the afflicted;  
encouraging the weak;  
helping the neighbor in whatever way one can;  
bearing with his rude manners and impoliteness;  
putting up with annoyances, labors, and the ingratitude and contempt of men in both church and state; obeying the magistrates; treating one’s parents with respect; being patient in the home with a cranky wife and an unmanageable family, and the like.”

In other words, serving others in love requires costly service in the ordinary duties of daily life. Like taking out the trash, or being polite to the rude cashier at the grocery store. Right here at First Pres you can find a number of ways to serve others. You can help with meals for people in our congregation who are sick or homebound. You can collect good quality used clothing for El Divino Salvador or Mission 911. You can volunteer to help with the refreshments after one of the services. You could come help with Vacation Bible School. The list of ways to serve around here is long and

always getting longer. Because once you have bound by love for others, the service will come naturally. Luther went on to say, “these works are so outstanding and brilliant that the whole world cannot comprehend their usefulness and worth.”

So here we see the paradox that we see so often from Jesus. By setting us free to serve, the Holy Spirit enslaves us to one another in love. Just as Christ took on the form of a servant, so we too are to become servants of each other.

The amazing thing is that this kind of “slavery” really is freedom! Now that Christ has freed me from sin and death, I am no longer enslaved by selfish desire. Instead, I am liberated to serve others with his love. Only Jesus Christ can make us truly free – free from the bondage of sin and free to serve others.

*Amen*