

“Free From Me”

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Galatians 5:1-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ²Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. ⁴You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

So what do you wish you could be free from? I know, some of us would say taxes, some would say our jobs, some would say health issues. Let me warn you husbands, if you even think “wife” she will read your mind and while she may not whack you here in church, you may not be backed out of your parking spot here before she does. All kidding aside, this Independence Day, I want to think seriously with you about what freedom means in a spiritual sense.

Paul says, “For freedom, Christ has set us free.” And as a nation of people who believe in freedom, indeed in some ways we worship freedom as a God more than the actual God who has given us freedom, we love our freedom. And we can look at freedom from many different points of view, but this morning I want to try to stick to the area I am most familiar with, if not necessarily an expert in and that is spiritual freedom. I also believe that ultimately this is the source of all

freedom, and if one is not spiritually free, then all the other forms of freedom are immaterial. The Bible also testifies, to this saying, “if Christ has set you free, you are free indeed.” [John 8:36].

When we talk about what we would like to be free from Paul is talking to the Galatians about freedom from religious ritual law. Paul helped the church in Galatia get started teaching them they did not have to follow the Jewish purity laws to be a Christian. But then he went on his way and other Christian leaders came in telling them they had to follow them or they weren't real Christians. Included in this set of rules was the rule that men had to be circumcised. Obviously this was quite alarming to many of the men and evidently quite a big doctrinal fight had broken out. Paul got wind of this and wrote to them to tell them they did not need to be circumcised, that in fact it would not only not help them in their relationship with God it would hinder

them. His argument was that if they chose to keep one part of the law, like circumcision, then they had to keep all of it or they would not be in God's grace. He urges them to let go of this desire to be justified – that is to be right with God – by obeying religious laws. In a bit of ironic language he tells them that if they practice circumcision they are actually cutting themselves off from Christ. In a bit of a sad note he adds, to live by law means they, and we, have fallen away from grace. In other words, we and they give up our freedom, and the sad thing is we give it up to be bound by human made religious laws.

Obviously this specific argument about circumcision is not something we have today. But circumcision was a symbol for the Jewish people. It was a sign of living in relationship with God, of obeying God, and of belonging. As much as it was a painful and personal act it was also a way of expressing that one was part of this group God had called to be his people. In another sense this was a “gateway to God.” In order to relate to this today we have to understand what “gateways” to God we Christians set up today.

Many of them are not issues we wrestle with in this church. We do not say one has to “speak in tongues” in order to be truly “saved.” We don't demand one be baptized by immersion to get into God's grace. We don't tell people you have to have been “born again” in some prescribed specific formula to qualify for God's love. These aren't gateways we set up before

people. I tried to think about what we would say you have to do in first in order to truly be loved by God, to belong to God's people and I don't know if it is a matter of religious doctrine, dogma or practice. Perhaps the closest we come is in terms of traditions – the way we have always done things - and if you don't do things the way we do them then somehow that means we won't accept it. That is a challenge for all of us especially when it comes to things we “like” or “dislike” in our worship service.

Nancy Ricker and I just returned from Calvin College in Grand Rapids. We went there to do the end of the year colloquium for our Worship Renewal Grant that we have been working on this past year. One of the great parts about our participation in the worship grant is the ways it challenges us to remember that worship isn't about us, it is about God. It isn't about what we like or dislike, but about how we faithfully worship God. It isn't about a particular form of worship, order of worship or type of music it is about finding ways to be both expressive of our experience to God, and formative in our experience of God. Worship expresses what we feel and know about God, but it also teaches us and shapes us to grow in our understanding of God. In that sense, worship leads me to my greatest desire for freedom, personally.

You see, if I were honest about what I want to be spiritually free from it all boils down to one thing: me! I want to be free from me. I want to be free

from the tyranny of my own self, my own way, my own ways which “cut me off from Christ” and cause me to “fall away from grace.” Let me share what I mean and maybe ask yourself if you don’t have this same tendency.

As I have often said, this culture in which we live and are immersed has taught us well that it is “all about ME.” Consumer culture is based on selling me on the idea that is all about me and my wants my desires and about fulfilling them as fast and as fully as I can, because tomorrow they are going to tell me about the new thing I don’t have but should. Consumer culture tells me I will only find satisfaction, I will only know freedom, when I have everything I want. And that will only last a day because tomorrow there will be a new, or a new and improved version of something I didn’t have today. As much as I know in some way this is not true, it is hard not to be influenced by this notion that freedom is about satisfying me. I find it hard not to live for me.

Now, as a sophisticated Christian, I know I should do things for others. I know I should engage in acts of charity, but I often wonder if the reason I am doing these things is still in order to make ME feel better about ME more than out of love for the one for whom I am doing that thing. We can get tied up in asking ourselves if we can truly do anything without selfish interest. The philosophers have already had a field day with this, some arguing that there is no such thing as “altruism” – that is doing something completely without

concern for the benefit one receives from it. Others argue that the outcome is the important thing and whether or not I get some kind of satisfaction out of doing good for someone doesn’t matter as long as it benefits the other person.

Beyond the philosophical argument is the spiritual question which we might state as, “am I doing this in order to be ‘circumcised’ spiritually before God?” In other words am I doing it because I fear God’s punishment rather than in response to God’s love. The freedom that Christ gives us, that Paul calls us to stand firm in, is the freedom from fear of God’s punishment. Too many Christians still base their faith and too many churches still base their preaching on fear of God’s punishment and guilt for deserving that punishment. The risk of doing anything because I am seeking to win God’s love and avoiding God’s punishment is that then I am not really free.

The freedom that Christ gives and the freedom that Paul urges us to receive is the freedom that he speaks of in the last verse we read this morning. It is the freedom to know that “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” What that means is that if my faith and trust in God is based on my love of God then I will naturally, one might even say automatically, respond by putting my faith to work in ways that express God’s love for me and my love for God. The difficulty of this is when I get in the way of myself. That’s what I mean when I say that most of all I need to free from *me*.

The difference is simple. When I do things out of love I find it is a blessing, never a burden. When I do it out of obligation I can easily fall into resentment when my efforts aren't appreciated enough or I don't get the love back that I want. Paul reminds me that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

When you hear someone judging someone else's faith based on whether they believe certain things about the Bible, worship in certain ways, or are part of a certain denomination, remember Paul's words: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

When you wonder how to make your faith come alive, remember Paul's words: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

When you are sharing the communion plates remember that this is a symbol of the way we serve, and of why we serve each other: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

When you feel like you can't make a difference because the world is so big and you are just one person, remember the words of Paul: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

If you want to experience real freedom, and you are like me, your greatest need is to free from the tyranny of yourself, remember the words of Paul: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

May God continue to strengthen us in his love, and remind us that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love." AMEN.