

“The Trouble With Freedom”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “FAITH AND FREEDOM”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
July 12, 2009

Galatians 5: 1 - 7, 12 – 25 NRSV

¹For 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.

⁷You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? ¹²I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, factions, dissensions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

I am warning you, as I warned you before, those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

At heart, I am really a lazy guy. Oh, I like to stay busy, but I love the idea of being able to just laze around on a beach all day and do nothing. The trouble is I rarely have the freedom to do whatever I want to do.

I think we all want “freedom,” don’t we? When I was a teenager I can remember yearning for the “freedom” of a driver’s license, a car of my own, and the open road. Later I realized that freedom came with car payments, insurance premiums, repair bills, and a

host of other add-ons that limited my freedom.

The college student longs for the freedom from classes and exams and boring professors only to discover that the alternative is a job and jobs come with deadlines, boring co-workers and overbearing bosses that put a severe hurting on freedom. The married man longs for the freedom of unmarried life when he could run around and have freedom from the responsibilities of home and family. Just ask Steve McNair how that worked out. Or ask the guy who ended up with an STD, or who ended up divorced, broke, and left behind by his younger honey who decided he wasn't as great as the next guy she could cheat with.

I'm not sure if any of us wants freedom on those terms, but freedom seems to be something we all want. It is also the foundation of our nation. It is at the center of our gospel. I want to try to reflect on how the two intersect in our lives and understand how Paul thought our freedom in faith can be lived out. Patriots remind us that freedom isn't free but you can pay too high a price for the wrong kind of freedom. Let's look at how Paul interpreted freedom for the Christians at Galatia.

The reality is that Paul's ministry was marked by an ongoing battle between his preaching that Christians were spiritually free and did not have to follow the Jewish law, and those who would come along behind him and say that Christians did have to follow the Jewish law. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul was writing to a group of Christians

that he had "liberated." He had shared the good news of freedom from the law with them and they had gladly received it. But others had come along after Paul left and got them thinking otherwise. The issue seemed to have focused on circumcision and whether Christians had to follow that part of the Jewish law to be acceptable to God.

Paul is not pleased with this bit of interference with his flock in Galatia. In a bit of irony Paul tells them they have "cut yourselves off" from Christ by trying to live by the law. And in moment of extreme honesty Paul expresses his [rather unChristian] hope that those telling the Galatians to be circumcised ought to go off and "castrate themselves." Ouch!

Let me try to point out how I think this plays out in our own lives. I think it comes down to choosing between three alternatives. Each of us chooses everyday how free we want to be and under what terms. If we choose to live as Christians we do not have to live by spiritual law, but we do have to choose how to live by the spirit. This freedom from spiritual law can lead us down three paths.

First, we can choose the freedom that leads us back to slavery. This is the choice that says, I can do whatever I want without regard to consequences. Paul called this "living by the desires of the flesh." I would call it living by the desires of the "unspiritual" self. This is what most people think of as temptation. I am tempted to eat whatever I want, drink whatever I want, put whatever I want in my body and do whatever I want

regardless of its consequences on others. This is basically the “freedom” most people in our culture today live by. They are not only “me-first” types, but “me-first-only-and-always, now” types.

The trouble with this kind of freedom is obvious. If I eat anything I want I will be a glutton and soon weigh six hundred pounds and find I am neither free nor happy. The same is true if I choose to drink, take drugs, have sex or do other things that I am free to do simply because I can. The sad truth is this does not lead to greater freedom. This is the freedom that leads back to slavery.

The second kind of freedom evolves naturally out of this kind of false freedom. This is the freedom “from” that doesn’t connect us with God or anyone else. It is the freedom that we abuse in our personal and social relationships. It is tempting to wish that I was free to disregard any one else’s feelings or well-being. It is hard to choose someone else’s blessing when it limits my freedom and happiness. I wish it were possible to “do your own thing” as my generation used to preach, and never take into account its effect on others. Unfortunately, that is very much the world we live in.

Here are just some of the consequences of that: we live in the most violent society in the history of the world. We have hundreds of thousands of children that go to bed hungry and homeless every night in the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. We have corporations that willingly ignore the humanity of their employees if it will

result in an increase in shareholder profit – and ironically many of us and many of their own employees are the shareholders. So we regularly participate in our own suffering and injustice. I could go on and on but you know the state of our nation and world as well as I do.

The Bible knows this as well. It reveals it in the attitude of Cain who killed his brother because he perceived that somehow he stood in the way of his happiness. We have the Israelites leaving the slavery of Egypt for the “Promised Land” and yet clamoring to go back to slavery the minute they got tired of depending on God’s provision in the desert. Once they arrived in the Promised Land we see that they used their new-found freedom to ignore the needs of the widow, the orphan, the outcast, and the foreigner among them. They perverted the justice of the courts, they gave preferential treatment to the wealthy and the powerful. We see it in the messages of the prophets to the government and its rulers, and the courts and the upper class that they had used their freedom to enslave others. This is freedom from, but it is not only without real value, it denies the value of others.

True freedom, the freedom God intends us to enjoy connects us with our need to be connected with others to be truly free. Paul points out that living by the desires of “the flesh,” or what I call my “unspiritual self” isn’t freedom. Paul says real freedom comes when we choose “through love to become slaves to one another.” It is ultimately how we fulfill the only “law” that Christ

commanded, which is “to love one another as I have loved you.” Ooooh, that doesn’t sound like fun, does it? That doesn’t sound like freedom does it? But ultimately it is who we are and what we were created to be, and it is the only authentic freedom.

One writer has put it this way:

“Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. In the beginning, when God created humankind, God could have made us puppet-like, so that whenever God wanted us to do something, God would just pull a string and we would do it. What kind of relationship would that be? God created us, women and men, with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the Living God.

“To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of ‘me, myself, and I.’ To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self and, as one who is wise has put it, to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service. To be free is to be free for responsibility, not from responsibility. I think of how Christ Jesus who had everything in the world going for himself—power, status, safety—how he chose, freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for the sake of the world. Now that is freedom.”

She adds, “I sometimes use a little test Frederick Buechner suggests. I use it to see if I am still a functioning, free moral agent. Beuchner wrote: ‘If you

have not cried for someone other than yourself in the last year, then the chances are you are already dead.’ That’s a good place to start, having feelings of empathy for the other. But I know I haven’t passed the test until I actually do something—make a call, bake a pie, write a letter, offer comfort, stand up for someone whose voice is not being heard. How did Paul put it? The only thing that matters is faith working in love.”¹

I think that means that freedom can be hard work. Sure, I’d rather lay back and enjoy the freedom of a day at the beach, but that isn’t what makes life worth living, it is just one of the perks that a life worth living enjoys. I know that real freedom, as the patriots among us remind us, isn’t free. And while I may not agree with the methods some think it takes to be free, I know I have to keep working at being truly free. For a lazy guy like me, that’s the real trouble with freedom, you know. AMEN.

¹ Joanna Adams, “The Predicament of Freedom,” July 1, 2007, day1.org.