

“Freedom & Responsibility”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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One should probably start any sermon about freedom and responsibility by quoting Kris Kristofferson that freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose but I choose not to do that. Instead I want to start by reminding us that next Sunday is the fourth of July which in many countries is simply another day but here we will be celebrating the 234th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence – a document most modern day politicians wouldn't sign I fear for it lays out in no uncertain terms ideas that challenged the accepted notions of the day. The idea that all people are created equal makes a mockery of the English class system and rejected out of hand the notion of nobility of birth! If all are created equal then the notion that one's parentage offered special rights or privileges would be discarded. Our reading for today is another example of how the expected norms of the day were challenged.

Paul is writing to a church congregation which he at least helped found. Located in what we now call Turkey, the Galatians are a group of newly converted Christians who come to this new religion from what were called pagan or non-Jewish backgrounds. They bring to the faith none of the practices and/or understandings that those who converted from Judaism would bring. They had not been raised in communities where the religion of Jesus had been practiced with its insistence on male circumcision and its food laws. There were clear rules and expectations which followers of Judaism knew and sought to follow. When Paul speaks to this group of freedom, of being made free, he is in part speaking of the need for the newly converted to be free of past beliefs and practices which they might have brought from their prior religious faith but also he is speaking of the demand by some believers in Christ that new, non-Jewish believers need become Jews before converting to Christianity. And this would mean circumcision for males and food laws to be followed by all. It would mean learning and participating in a culture unfamiliar to most of the people who lived in Galatia.

I think, though, for Paul the major difficulty is that such conversion would mean going back to a way of life which had been set hundreds if not thousands of years before. In fact, I would venture that if we read what most consider to be the authentic works of Paul, those seven letters which are recognized by most scholars as the ones written by him, if we read these we will truly discover a Paul who talks of freedom as a means for the faith to evolve, grow and change as people evolved, grew, and changed. Authentic Paul is a great believer in the ability of people to change and to grow and that freedom within the bounds of the religion called Christianity was extremely important for it allowed people to practice that religion in a manner which was relevant to their lives and cultures.

Paul here as elsewhere in his authentic writings uses the rhetorical device or practice of offering one thing as good versus another which is evil. The juxtaposition of flesh and spirit here marks such. However, we need be careful in our understanding or interpretation of what Paul is saying. Paul writes of the evil of the flesh versus the goodness of the spirit and some immediately interpret this to be Paul railing against the pleasures of the body – eating, drinking, and sex. But if we read this carefully and closely, we will find that Paul is not disparaging such but instead is

despairing at the use of one versus the use of the other. The use of the body or the flesh is what is key, not the body itself. Paul is really concerned about freedom and responsibility which we call stewardship. Stewardship is how we use that which we have. It is not should we use it or a belief that use of something is wrong. Paul is concerned with how a community can continue, be constructed in a situation of oppression and where the practitioners of the faith were a definite minority. Paul celebrates freedom for it will enable this community to create a foundational understanding which will enable it not just to survive but to grow.

Paul in all his writings emphasizes the use of one's abilities, talents but always that use is to be carried out in a responsible, faith-filled manner. It is not pleasure which Paul disparages. It is the irresponsible seeking of pleasure at the expense of others in the community. Here Paul speaks of those things which create community, which enable people to live lives of joy, hope, justice, and pleasure. Note how each of the evils as well as each of the good things involve relationships with others. Peace, lasciviousness, justice, and lust – all require our involvement with others. They are not about how to live alone but how to live in community. And in building that community we are free from the self-centered evils which destroy community. Note well that in the list of works of the spirit the last is self-control. And that all the others are acts or ways of living which enable the other to be celebrated and community to be built. And each is a matter of how one uses one's self, in other words stewardship.

Paul's commitment is to a faith which grows, evolves, changes. The works of the spirit are all about such evolution, growth for all require one to be in community and to live out the faith with others. The spirit filled life is a life of gentleness, self-control, patience, love. The flesh filled life is one of licentiousness, sorcery, strife, jealousy. Comparing the two we need see that neither is defined clearly as either only bodily acts nor what we might initially define as spiritual acts. But in each case, Paul's list includes acts, ways of living, activities which either destroy the possibility of community, create it or depend upon it. It's really all about stewardship and how the believer uses her or his faith, how we live it out. Paul is concerned with the use of ourselves, our bodies, our minds not trying to deny their importance.

Over the next few months we are going to be participating in a process which we call discernment. That process is about stewardship and how we believe our faith ought be used and what it means to the communities of which we are a part. We are going to be involved in defining what the fruits of the spirit ought be and how we might share them with others. In proceeding, I hope we will keep Paul in mind and seek to define our faith and its role in our lives. The community of faith, this worshiping community celebrates the priesthood of all believers and what that will mean in the months ahead is that each of us will be called upon to define our faith. And we should seek to do it in a manner which balances the freedom of defining it with the responsibility of assuring that it remains relevant and historical.

Relevant means that it has meaning for this community and that it is achievable or at least our involvement in it makes a reasonable contribution towards its achievement. What that convoluted sentence means is that, for example, we cannot solve the crisis of global warming by ourselves but this congregation can make a contribution to its solution. We can't end discrimination based on anything but we can act as an example of how a community can welcome and love without regard.

Historical means we understand that we are a worshipping community whose lives are lived in Madison Wisconsin in 2010 and that we are a Christian community whose faith is founded in a belief in Jesus as Christ. Our discernment of what our faith means will be colored by these two ideas. However, if we listen to Paul we are freed from the constraints which many feel and which many use as a reason for us to remain stuck in a community seeking to return to 1955 or to found this community in a faith responding to the needs and ideas of the 19th Century. We are free to think and to grow, to change and to evolve and we are privileged to celebrate the presence of a God who calls us to a life lived as free people. Let us go forth in joy, hope, and love working to build, to foster, and to construct a worshipping community which goes into the world and challenges hatred with love, oppression with justice, yesterday's values with tomorrow's promise of justice. Let us be a people of faith who dare to live freely and responsibly. AMEN.