

FREE FOR WHAT?

Scriptures: Galatians 5:13-23 (NRSV and *The Message*)

We should not take for granted the fact that we are this morning. In January of this year a crowd of Islamists looted and burned a Christian church in Algeria while the local police stood by and watched. In North Korea, the previous dictator, Kim Il Sung, closed 1,500 Christian churches between 1948 and 1994. Today the few Christian churches remaining are tightly controlled by the government to insure absolute loyalty to the current dictator Kim Jong-Il. In fact North Korea is somewhat reminiscent of the Roman Empire in the time of the New Testament. In the Roman Empire it was okay to be a Christian as long as you worshiped the emperor. In North Korea it is okay to be a Christian as long as you worship the “Dear Leader.”

In Saudi Arabia, the law requires all citizens to be Muslims. Christian immigrants or expatriates from other countries are allowed to worship freely in their homes, but they are not allowed to have public gatherings, and it is forbidden for a Muslim to convert to Christianity. This is also true in some other countries. You may remember that in 2006 a man named Abdul Rahman was arrested in Afghanistan for becoming a Christian. He was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death before an international outcry caused the Afghan government to release him and allow him to leave the country. But you notice he had to leave the country. We should not take for granted the freedom we have to be here this morning.

But the freedom we enjoy in this country comes with a responsibility, and that is the subject of our scripture reading this morning. In the New Revised Standard Version, Galatians 5:13 says, “For 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.”

For the Bible freedom is not an end in itself; it is a means to a greater end. The greater end is love. The goal of freedom is a right relationship with God and other people, the kind of relationship in which we serve one another instead of taking advantage of one another. *The Message* puts it this way: “It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows.”

There is a warning in that verse. If we use our freedom for self-indulgence, we will lose it. Think about how that works. Right now Congress is considering a bill to put major new restrictions and regulations on the banking industry. Why are they doing that? You may or may not agree with the proposed regulations, but why is it even being considered? Isn’t it because of abuses that happened in the banking industry because of their freedom? Many banks and financial institutions were more concerned about short-term profits than about the long-term affects of their actions on families and on our society at large. In fact they were more concerned about short-term profits than their own future viability. Using freedom to do whatever you want is an invitation to lose that freedom.

This week I did some research at the Gonzaga Law Library. I wanted to find out how many new laws had been passed in the State of Washington since 1981. The quickest way I could think of to do this was to measure the volumes of the Revised Code of Washington. This is not exact, but it does give you an idea of how many pages of laws there are in Washington today compared to 1981. So I went to the Gonzaga Law Library and measured the volumes. In 1981 the Revised Code of Washington had 8 volumes, each about 1 ½ inches thick. In 2008, the most recently printed version, the Revised Code of Washington had 9 volumes, each about 2 ½ inches thick. In other words the Revised Code of Washington in 2008 is over twice as thick as it was in 1981. We have twice as many pages of laws in Washington today than we had 27 years ago.

Do you see what has happened? When freedom is no longer shaped by conscience, it gets shaped by laws and regulations. But if we need more and more laws and regulations to keep us from hurting each other or exploiting each other, then what will become of freedom?

This is not a problem just with Democrats or Republicans? The Revised Code of Washington has grown under both parties. It is a problem with us. If we use our freedom to pursue our own happiness, our own wealth, our own self-interest without regard to the needs of other people or to the long term good of our own community and or even to the long-term well being of this planet, we will eventually lose our freedom. As Paul says in verse 15, “If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?”

This is true not only in the realm of politics but in our personal lives. Look again at Galatians 5:16-18. This is so graphic:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

Is that what you really want from freedom? Or is it the freedom to do good in other people’s lives, to build relationships of love with God and with other people?

This fall we will study the book of Exodus in our church services. Exodus begins with the people of Israel living as slaves in Egypt. But God sends Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the promised land. But when God sends Moses to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, God tells him to say, “Thus says the Lord: Let my people go that they may worship me.” In the Bible freedom is never for its own sake. It is for the sake of serving God. Listen again to Galatians 5:22-23:

But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about

life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

How would you rather use your freedom: for repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; or for relationships of loyal commitment? How would you rather use the freedom of enterprise we have in this country: for cutthroat competition, or service to people in need? How would you rather use the freedom of speech we have in this country: for the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival (here you can insert the names of many political commentators on talk radio or cable television), or to speak the truth in love for the building up of the whole body? How would you rather use your freedom of worship: to live only for yourself, or to live for and express your love to the God who created you and wants to give you eternal life?

The only way we will preserve freedom of speech in this country is if we use it to speak the truth in love. The only way we will preserve freedom of assembly in this country is if we use it to build bridges of community. And the only way we will preserve our freedom of worship in this country is if we use it to worship Someone greater than ourselves.

- Ken Onstot
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