

Proper 8C— Galatians 5:1,13-25
June 26, 2022
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
Church of the Good Shepherd

I want to be your love slave

It was one of those scenes that just courts gawking bystanders. Two police officers had stopped a car in downtown Milwaukee and ordered the driver to get out from behind the wheel. The man was obviously very drunk, so drunk he had a hard time standing up, let alone being able to complete a field sobriety test. The resulting exchange between officers and the glassy-eyed, thick tongued offender drew a crowd. The police were trying to get the man to turn over, lean over, and put his hands on the hood of his car. But the man kept screaming, “Hey...this is a free country. And that means nobody can tell me what to do!” One of the officers replied, “Yeah, sure, buddy...If you can spell American, I’ll let you go.” The drunk yelled back, “Don’t make fun of me, sir...I can spell it borwards and fackwards!”

“This is a free country...” We talk a lot about freedom here in America—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press. In a few days, we’ll be celebrating the 4th of July, *the* festival of freedom, the day we commemorate the anniversary of our forefather’s declaring freedom from English rule. Our nation was birthed out of a yearning for freedom. Not five miles from here, at Historic St. John’s, Patrick Henry gave his speech containing the memorable words, “Give me liberty or give me death,” which served as the rallying cry of the revolutionaries. It could be said to be the motto of our country still today, we prize freedom so much.

Of course, we still argue over what those freedoms mean and to what extent we are free to exercise them. We haggle over to what extent we have a free market and whether social media is free enough or too free. And we wrestle with whether freedom of religion protects our ability to worship only or to live according to one’s tenets of faith and morality. But as a concept and as an ideal, freedom is at the center of who we are as Americans, who we understand ourselves to be.

So when Paul says in our first lesson, “For freedom Christ has set us free,” we think we’ve just found some really good news. Paul says Jesus Christ wants us to be free, so whoever tries to take away our freedom is not just un-patriotic, they’re anti-Christian. The thing is, though, Paul was not an American. He knew nothing of Civil Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Boston Tea Party or even the Magna Carta. But, even if he did, the fact is, he would still not likely think of “freedom” the same way we do. You see, the way we typically think of freedom is as freedom from external restraint. Freedom, for us, is a freedom *from*—freedom from government, yes, but more generally, freedom from restrictions, from constraints, from limitations, from obligation to anything beyond us. Freedom in our culture is often seen as license to do “whatever I want, as long as I am not hurting anyone.” Of course, unbridled self-indulgence is rarely harmless to oneself or others. It inevitably leads to putting our desires first and thus using others for our own needs. Freedom to do whatever we please quickly devolves into doing whatever pleases us, whatever brings us pleasure, and we use others to get that pleasure.

This tendency of freedom from to degenerate into using others is bad enough. But there's a bigger problem. And it's that this freedom is ephemeral, fleeting. It can't last. It creates a vacuum, and as we learned in high school, nature abhors a vacuum. As soon as we are relieved of one yoke, we inevitably take on another. As soon as we get rid of one master, we become slaves to another. The throne cannot remain empty. Something, somebody has to rule. As Bob Dylan said, "everybody's gotta serve someone," even if that someone is ourselves. In fact, that can be even worse, for serving ourselves means serving our own selfish desires and those desires are never satisfied. We never have enough esteem, status, wealth, or pleasure. This way, "freedom," as in the freedom to indulge oneself, becomes just another form of slavery. As soon as we fancy ourselves as our own boss, we become slaves to our desires and our appetites. And as they say, "whoever works for himself has a tyrant for a boss."

Likely you know what I mean. Maybe you or someone you know is a slave to their career, maybe you're a slave to an addiction, to alcohol, cigarettes, food or pornography, or else a slave to worry and anxiety. Any person who has ever struggled to overcome a destructive habit like alcoholism knows how hard it is to not take that "yoke of slavery" on again. Once we have "forged a chain of habit," it's difficult to unshackle oneself.

For this reason, Paul tells the church in Galatia to "stand firm." He knows that Christian freedom is not easy, and one must forever work to not return to a "yoke of slavery." Remaining steadfast in a new commitment is not easy. The more familiar way of life beckons and seeks our re-enslavement.

It's like this story I heard concerning a farm in northeastern Iowa. A colleague of mine relates how a lightning strike set on fire a barn in which a church member housed his pigs. The farmer risked his life by going into his burning barn to chase his pigs out to safety. But try as he might to prevent the pigs from returning to the still-burning barn, sure enough a number of them raced right back into the barn and certain death. Those pigs traded freedom for captivity, life for death.

This is the predicament of freedom—as soon as we are freed, more often than not we end up enslaved to something else. Slavery is awful, yes, but freedom can be scary. With no one to tell you what to do, no one else to take responsibility for you, you are on your own, you have to take responsibility for yourself, and you have no one to blame when things go bad. Little wonder why once we earn freedom, we often go looking for someone else to be our master. This is what happened with the Hebrews after they left Egypt and its enslavement to Pharaoh: They made a golden calf so that they have something to be their god! It's the predicament that slaves in this country faced after the 13th Amendment was passed—now that they were no longer slaves, what were they going to do with their freedom. And it's the same predicament that Christians face when we are confronted with the reality of grace. It can be scary. What do we do once we are no longer slaves to sin?? The old way, enslavement, can seem much more attractive, for at least it's predictable, familiar.

A young woman came to worship one Sunday at the congregation I used to serve, and she was surprised to discover a whole new spirit of love, acceptance and forgiveness that she had not known in a church before. She came from a dysfunctional family, had experienced an abusive marriage, a difficult divorce and had been roundly criticized and even shunned by her very rigid

church. She had descended into depression, aided and abetted by her pastor and his continual condemnations of sin and shame—particularly *her* sin and shame! But her experience in this new, healthy spiritual environment was liberating, and she seemed to be making a home for herself in her new church. Then all of a sudden, she disappeared. Someone reported that she was back with her old church again. One of her new friends from our church visited with her and discovered the reason she went back. “It just didn’t feel right,” she said, “I went home feeling good every Sunday. There’s so much I’ve done...so much sin in my life. I shouldn’t be feeling so good about my life. It’s more normal at my old church!”

It’s hard to accept what Paul says, that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free, that we are free men and women, that Christ’s death and resurrection, made real for us in our baptism, has freed us from all the things, all the false gods, that enslave us. but it’s true. We are free, liberated.

When Paul writes, “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature”, he is at least implying that he knows how we can be tempted like those pigs to run back to situations we know are not good for us, to foolishly surrender our God-given freedom to return to slavery to our appetites.

The question for us is, once we accept that we are free, how can we make sure we are not backsliding, letting ourselves be mastered by our bad habits and addictions all over again? The answer lies in how we understand the freedom we have in Christ. We often think of freedom in the negative sense, as freedom from, as I said. But the freedom advanced by Paul and the rest of Scripture is freedom in a positive sense, a freedom for. When Paul talks about freedom, he is reminding us that yes, we have been freed from slavery, but more importantly we have been *freed for* a new life in Christ. We have been *freed from* all the things that prevent us from living the life that God wants for us, freed from those powers and forces that keep us away from being the people we are called to be—and at the same time we are *freed for* loving one another as Christ loved us. As Paul says, we are *freed* in order to “become *slaves* to one another.” Martin Luther, the German reformer, explains this paradox very well when he said, “A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to no one; and at the same time a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.” We are free, yet we are bound to each other, as slaves are bound to a master. And the chain that binds us to each other is love.

In fact, if I were to use our sign out here to advertise this morning’s Scripture reading, it would say “I want to be your love slave.” For that’s just what Paul is telling us we are to be, love-slaves to one another, to serve one another “in love.” To say we are to serve others “in love” means that serving is done voluntarily, not to follow some rule, to meet the demands of the Law, or even to feel good about ourselves. It is completely focused on the needs of the neighbor. This kind of love goes far beyond what anyone would say we are *obligated* to do, beyond what any moral law demands. It is an all-encompassing way of life, constantly seeking to serve those around us, our neighbors.

This kind of freedom, the freedom of serving through love, was manifest throughout Jesus’ life. Just consider the account we heard a few months ago from John’s gospel, how, on the night before he died for us, after supper, he got up from the table and, taking the role of a house slave, gets down on his hands and knees and washes the dusty, nasty feet of his disciples. That’s the freedom of Christ, the freedom *from* ourselves and *for* others.

It's clear, Paul in the letter to the Galatians is offering a radically different understanding of freedom than what we normally think of as freedom. True freedom, he says, is freedom in Christ. And the freedom Christ gives is not freedom for self-indulgence but freedom from selfishness for the service of others. This is the freedom in which life in community flourishes.

As we approach the day of celebration of our national freedom, we are reminded beforehand of Paul's invitation to know true freedom, freedom in Christ. The freedom Christ gives is not freedom to do as we please, to chase our dreams, to indulge in whatever feels good, to pursue happiness wherever we might find it. No, that's not big enough, not radical enough. The freedom of Christ is not freedom to do whatever we want. It is rather a radical submission to God and each other that forsakes personal gratification in order to fulfill God's calling in our lives. This freedom is a gift from God, not a right, and it remains our calling as well. We are freed to live as a freed people. Let us then show the world how free we are, by becoming slaves—love slaves—to each other. Amen.