

Galatians 5:1 pt.2
July 3, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

For freedom Christ has set us free. Do not again return to a yoke of slavery.”

Last week I focused on the first part of the verse. I suggested three things: First that Paul is telling the Galatians that the only purpose for Jesus accepting the sentence of death on the cross was humanity’s spiritual freedom. Freedom that is conditional upon following certain ritual laws is not freedom. It is slavery under another name. True freedom means that people make their own choices, determine their own steps with no one telling them these are the correct steps. You must do these things, believe in this way, and practice your faith in only this way. True freedom is the ability to surrender our lives to God freely and without reservation. Only in this way can a person freely receive the gift of unconditional love which God has given in and through Jesus Christ.

It is this freedom, Paul tells the Galatians, which liberates us from the power of sin. We are not truly enslaved by forces outside of us. Far more powerful are the forces of fear, anxiety, jealousy, self-pity, resentment, guilt, shame, anger, isolation and judgment. Yet these demons are tricky. They work best when we are not aware of them. They have much more destructive power when they work behind the scenes. For instance, when a person awakens in us one or more of these feelings, we don’t think, “I’m feeling jealous.” We think, “What do people see in him? He’s no better than anyone else.” Soon we are talking about the person behind his back and trying to color how others look at him. We feel vaguely uncomfortable talking behind a person’s back; but rather than admit that we are sinning against the person, we gather more people who will agree with us so that we will not feel so lonely or guilty. In C.S. Lewis’ classic,

The Screwtape Letters, this is one of the Devil's pet strategies to prevent the spread of God's love.

This why Paul is so insistent that the *only* purpose of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is this: utter freedom. This is the reason Paul is so passionate in his letter to the Galatians. They had received the good news that Jesus had freely died for their sins; they had only respond with faith and say, "Thank you." Trusting in Christ's free choice Paul had taught would liberate them from the power of those forces to do their toxic work. They could now freely live the life Jesus lived empowered by his resurrection.

Paul had left a community full of joy and willing service. Now he hears that this same community is being torn apart by internal conflict. In Paul's words, they are being *devoured*. The diagnosis is simple and tragic. People claiming to be true Christians have maligned Paul and his message. They have introduced the idea that simply receiving the good news is not enough. They must profess Jesus as messiah *and be circumcised* according to the Law of Moses.

The more Paul thinks about what has happened the more outraged he becomes. "Who has bewitched you?" he demands. They have forgotten the freedom with which and for which Christ has set them free. They have returned to the yoke of slavery. And the proof, as they say, is in the pudding. They are tearing apart the community of faith in the name of righteousness. Paul's worst fears are confirmed. No one is saying, "I am jealous. I am resentful. I am afraid. I feel passionate about what I believe." They are saying the three most dangerous words to any spiritual community, "*I am right!*" These words are destructive because they come with the arrogant judgment, "*You are wrong.*"

The villain in this debate is the single word comprised of a single letter: “I”. It is no longer God who is the source of all judgment between what is right and wrong. “I” am the judge. My beliefs and practices are now the measure of true spiritual practice. If your beliefs and practices meet my standards then you are a true Christian. If not, then you must repent and meet my standards. This is the description of one of the most terrible sins of all: self-righteousness. Indeed, self-righteousness may well be the most dangerous sin of all. It is a form of putting ourselves in God’s place. We no longer need to consult or defer to God. Our understanding of the Bible, of God, of Jesus and God’s will for humanity is sufficient. The Jews called this blasphemy—of claiming to be God. It is also a form of idolatry—of worshiping our wisdom over God’s wisdom.

The truly dangerous power of self-righteousness is the way it masks true motives. In self-righteousness I may be loaded with fear, judgment, anger, jealousy and the rest; but I do not own these feelings. Instead I channel them all into the passionate assertion that I am right and everyone else is wrong. When this happens the results are terrible...just terrible. No wonder Galatians contains Paul’s most emotional language!

Friends this morning let us celebrate our freedom. Let us celebrate among other things:

- The freedom to be wrong and to openly admit it. We are forgiven *sinner*s. Our freedom is the freedom to say and do dumb and hurtful things and to seek God’s forgiveness and that of the one or ones we have hurt.
- The freedom to accept the fact that we are loved freely *warts and all*. The point of being a follower of Jesus is *not* to live a sinless life. It is to live a godly life; that is, one that points beyond us to God.

- The freedom to extend to every other human being the freedom which we have received in Christ in humility and love.

The meal we are about to share is both a reminder of this true freedom and an encouragement. It is a reminder that everybody is welcome at Christ's table just as we are without one plea. There is no room at Christ's table for us to be comparing our lives with that of our sister or brother. Indeed our gratitude for God's love in Christ is such that we can be joyful that others find the love and acceptance, the grace and mercy which we find in this sacrament.

This meal is also an encouragement to persevere in living the life of freedom in Christ. Our inner demons don't want us to know that we are free. We will have daily attempts to sabotage our freedom in Christ. We will give into them and sometimes become discouraged that we are failing. We may feel tempted to give up. We have only to return in our hearts to the table, to this bread and this cup, and rediscover that nothing can take us out of God's arms.

Amen.