

Galatians 5: 1
June 26, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

There are two parts to this verse. First: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” And the second part is this: “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” The two exhortations are distinct and intimately related. This week I will speak about part one.

Part one can be translated in two ways. In our version the Greek is rendered “For freedom Christ has set us free.” That is, for the purpose of accomplishing our freedom; or, for the sake of our experiencing freedom. By this Paul means that Jesus endured the crucifixion for the purpose of in order that we could be free from the slavery to sin, the power of our passions and inner turmoil. The author of the book of Hebrews captures this idea when he writes, “For the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross.” The joy was not his own personal joy. It was the joy that he foresaw as liberation of human beings from the gift of true spiritual freedom.

There is a second acceptable translation of the verse which reads: “*With* freedom Christ has set us free.” This is a subtle but important shift. The focus turns from Jesus *purpose* in submitting to death by crucifixion—to accomplish our freedom—to the power which actually makes that freedom possible. “With freedom Christ has made us free” suggests that it is Jesus’ *freely choosing* to go to the cross that makes his death and resurrection powerful. It is Jesus’ freely choosing death for our sakes that makes our spiritual freedom possible. Since Jesus had committed no crime or grave violation of morality, no law could compel him to die. Had he chosen to hire a good attorney he would have been declared innocent and gone on his way. Who knows? Maybe he would have settled down, gotten married and had a family and reopened his father’s construction business. He was free to do this.

I have little doubt that Paul has both meanings in mind when he writes this line. It answers the question asked by generations, “Why did Jesus submit to crucifixion?” Paul’s answer is, “For the sake of human spiritual freedom Jesus freely accepted the ultimate punishment.”

Indeed it is the very freedom with which Jesus accepted crucifixion that allows us to receive that same freedom.

Of course the obvious question to ask is, “What is freedom?” The Greek term Paul employs is *eleutheria*. In its classic form it means to direct one’s self. In many translations including the King James Version, this word is rendered “liberty.” In this sense *eleutheria* indicates the freedom of external constraint. The context in Paul’s day was the institution of slavery. The definition of slavery is the condition of not being able to make one’s own choices. Freedom for the slave was the granting of the ability for the individual to be able to make his or her own choices without the constraint of an owner. It is this sense of freedom—or liberty—that we as citizens of the United States understand. We describe ourselves as a free country because no one is telling us what to say, where to live, what to believe, who to vote for. We celebrate and honor our military women and men for their sacrifices in protecting our freedom from tyranny imposed by a foreign power. All of the debates in our history have been about how to

maintain this freedom in the context of a complex community of competing agendas and needs and opinions.

It is here that we encounter the great distinction between the freedom of the community and the freedom of the individual.

Historically there is tension between these “freedoms.” Freedom for all means limitations for some individual liberties. I may own a gun but I may not open fire in a public place. The current debate over gun control is truly about whether the safety of the whole of society justifies the prohibiting of the purchase of certain weapons by private individuals. It is a legitimate debate about which we have strong disagreements. Yet it is the very mark of a free society that we have these debates. It is the sign of a *mature* society how these debates are conducted.

This may seem like a digression but it is not. Paul tells the Galatians that their arguments about what is necessary for true salvation—or spiritual freedom— are misguided. The community is being split apart. There are those who accept Paul’s teaching that the only condition for receiving the gift of freedom in Christ is exactly that,

to receive it *in Christ*. There are no rules or laws one must promise to obey before one is assured of being saved. Yet, there are those who teach that true salvation means believing that Jesus is the messiah *and* adhering to the Law of Moses. At particular issue is the insistence that males be circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

For Paul, all that is necessary is that people believe in the freedom which led Christ to the cross. This means believing in both the purpose of Jesus submitting to crucifixion—the joy of the vision of complete human spiritual freedom and claiming the power of Christ’s freedom in order to receive the power that human will cannot achieve. They must believe that Jesus went to the cross *for the purpose of freeing them* from the power of sin and death. *And, of critical importance, they must put the whole of their trust in the power of Christ’s free choice to choose death on their behalf.*

Before I wrap up these reflections, I want to make one or two suggestions:

First, that for Paul and Jesus and the teaching of Christianity, true freedom has less to do with freedom from external forces; it has far more to do with what goes on inside of us: fear, jealousy, resentment, worry, unresolved anger and grief, loneliness and isolation. It is in our nature to deny these interior realities and project them outward on the world. We blame the government, politicians, the media, those crazy people, immigrants, liberals, conservatives. We stop listening to different perspectives and instead only listen to people who confirm our point of view. Soon we are only talking to people who agree with us. With Lucy in Peanuts we come to believe that if everybody agreed with us, *they'd be right!* Identifying our trouble with people and forces beyond us leads us to believe the world outside of us is evil and we are powerless to do anything about it except perhaps to ignite bombs or shoot people at random. We give power to dark forces beyond our control and withdraw into small worlds isolated from those who seem different from us and our point of view. We may think that we are free within this ever shrinking circle of relationships but we are less and less

free. The perceived danger of the world has more and more influence and power to call the tune of our lives.

It is only the vast canopy of God's unbounded loving grace for the whole of humanity revealed in Jesus Christ that liberates from this dangerous isolation. It is only as we trust that we are already free in Christ that we can unmask the forces which keep us living in our small worlds and which open us up to the infinite and ever expanding world that is ours when we are truly free from the demons with in us and can fearlessly embrace the fullness of God's creation. Amen.