

June 30, 2013

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 5.1, 13-25

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

In a few days, we will celebrate our hard-fought gain of independence from Great Britain in 1776. We also celebrate and honor everyone who has worked, at desks, in fields, in trenches, with pens, speeches and weapons, to hold fast to all of the freedoms we liberally enjoy in this country. I am, this week and every week, humbled by those who have given so generously so that I might have so much. We still indeed have a long way to go to ensure that all are free and equal under the laws of this land, but I also hope that you can all join with me in moments of thanksgiving this week for the great distance we have come.

So today, in our fifth installment of sermons on Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, the lectionary tosses us a "gimme": For freedom Christ has set us free. Chapter 5, verse 1 is the central focal point of the entire letter. Everything in this letter until now has been leading up to this statement. Everything after will support it. For freedom Christ has set us free. It is a great reminder and sobering message for this pre-Fourth weekend.

Freedom, for Paul, is not about self-autonomy. Freedom, to Paul, does not mean that everyone gets what she wants, does what she wants, takes what she wants. In Paul's estimation of freedom in Christ, we are not at the mercy of our own whims, not enslaved to any master, not even the master of our own selfishness.

Instead, we are freed in Christ and by Christ. We are freed in love and for love. We are freed to serve—not because we are forced by an earthly ruler who will break us for disobedience, but because we are compelled by compassion for one another, we are drawn into service out of devotion to our community, and ultimately, devotion to God.

Unfortunately for me, one commentary I read cautions the preacher against "confusing the freedom of which Paul speaks with nationalistic discourses about freedom. This is not Fourth of July oratory." I agree, in principle, though I think this is a pretty narrow view of how Christians might view our national pride or our civic understanding.

So I will not use Paul's chant for freedom in Christ as a jingoistic slogan to prove the superiority of our way of life as citizens of the United States. But I will remind us, all of us, that the freedom we have in Christ we have as a gift, unbidden and undeserved. And the freedom we have as citizens of the great country are also a gift, hard-fought and oft-tested. They are—mercifully—compatible, so long as we continue to use our Christian calling as those freed by Christ for love to direct the use of our national and civic freedom.

As citizens of the United States, we have the right to take and take and take, to hoard and have, to lord it over those who do not. We have the right to gossip, to isolate, to exclude. We have the right to lie and even cheat, to harm and hate, so long as we stay within the very wide bounds of the law. We have those rights, rights won by our forebears and protected by ourselves and our peers. Exercising those freedoms is not compatible with a Gospel of love. Exercising those rights is not compatible with freedom gifted to us by God.

But we have other rights, too, in this country. We have the right to love fully and fiercely. We have the right to choose our manner, place and focus of our worship. We have the right to vote our consciences in order to better our society. We have the right to use our resources to speak truth to power. We have the right to open our eyes to inequality, injustice, ugliness and hatred and work to end them. And exercising THESE rights brings us closer to living out our calling as freed in Christ. Freed for love.

And so back to those freedoms we enjoy under the laws of this country: There are many ways to express our gratitude to those who have fought hard to win liberties we partake of today. One of the ways I have chosen to show my gratitude is to appreciate those freedoms that uphold the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to use them to their fullest potential.

I feel most called to use my freedom of speech, to make sure that my voice is among those calling, crying out for love. St. Paul compels me to. Christ compels me to. Love compels me to. I have and will continue to call out to our government, to our community, to our national church bodies, reminding us that while in Christ we are all free, in the United States there are some liberties withheld from those at the margins.

Speaking out against injustice is among the most patriotic acts I can think of. I am grateful for this freedom, both from our country and from our God. I know that you exercise your civic freedoms in service to Christ as well, with your voices, with your votes, with your feet and with your prayers.

Again, I hope that in these next few days, as we all get whipped into a frenzy of red, white and blue, you will take a moment to reflect on the words of St. Paul: "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence... Love your neighbor as yourself."