

Proper 8 Year C
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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”
What beautiful words to ponder
On this Sunday, so close to the 4th of July.
They ring out like the Liberty Bell.

But then, just as generations of patriots
Have reminded us that freedom isn't free,
Paul adds his own stern reminder:
Freedom must not lead to self-indulgence.
Christ did not set us free
Just so we could spend our lives
Doing whatever we want.

No, freedom has a price.
And for Christians that price is loving our neighbor,
And serving one another.

When the Continental Congress declared the separation
of the 13 colonies from Great Britain
243 years ago,
liberty was foremost in the minds of our nation's founders.
But the idea did not originate with them, of course.
In every age and across the earth,
human beings have,
as the inscription of the Statue of Liberty reads,
yearned to "breathe free."

Three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson
drafted the Declaration of Independence,
the Hebrew people suffered under bondage in Egypt.
They yearned for freedom.
God sent a man named Moses
who demanded of Pharaoh,

"Let my people go!"
When Pharaoh refused, God delivered.

A thousand years later, the people were again oppressed,
both by the tyranny of the Roman Empire
and by the powers and principalities of the world,
and God sent a man named Jesus.
And when he began his ministry, he announced
that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit
"to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives. . .
to let the oppressed go free."

This same liberating Jesus
would later say to his closest followers,
"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples,
and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . .
so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Freedom.
It is an idea that originates in the very heart of God.
In the beginning, when God created humankind,
God could have made us puppet-like,
so that whenever God wanted us to do something,
God would just pull a string and we would do it.

But what kind of relationship would that be?
Instead, God created us
with the capacity and the responsibility
to freely make our own decisions.
The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit.
Its source is nothing less than the free will of the Living God.

There are more than 50 references to freedom in the New Testament,
each of them exploring a different dimension of the subject.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians,
Which we read this morning,

it seems as if the church there was divided into camps.
 There were those who believed that freedom
 meant license to do whatever you pleased.
 But Paul disagrees with this.
 "Do not use your freedom for self-indulgence," he says,
 "but through love become slaves of one another,
 for the whole law is summed up in this single commandment:
 You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Another faction in the church in Galatia
 was made up of those
 who thought everybody needed to
 stick to the old ways of doing things,
 and that included circumcision.
 Which is fine and good if you're eight days old,
 But a lot harder for new adult converts to accept.

That crowd would have said that freedom in Christ is all well and good,
 but they still felt much more secure
 following all 613 commandments
 that devout Jews are required to follow.

Paul didn't agree with them either.
 He was convinced that whether you choose to observe
 Or to ignore
 Religious ritual
 Was really of no consequence.
 He was pretty sure God doesn't care one way or the other.
 According to Paul,
 "The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Just as each generation of Americans
 must learn anew what our Pledge of Allegiance maintains –
 that civil liberty and justice for all go hand in hand –
 so each generation of Jesus' followers
 must learn anew that Christian liberty cannot exist
 without love.

To be free really means to be liberated
from the prison of "me, myself, and I."
To be truly free
is to move into the risky business of love,
And to giving oneself to the demands of service.
To hear Paul tell it,
We need to be less focused on our personal salvation
And more focused on building up the entire community,
And with bearing each other's burdens.

God made us as one human family,
All of us bound to one another in God's heart,
so that we are by nature inclined toward one another.
It means that when one of us is in need,
We are all in need.
The suffering of one is, in a real sense, our own suffering.

By the will of God
and through the power of the Holy Spirit,
freedom and responsibility belong together
in our lives and in the life of our faith communities.

The same is true, I believe, for our nation.
As people of faith, we ought to be working every day
to create a society
that is marked by concern for the common good.
We ought to be listening for the voices
of those who are not being heard.
We ought to be speaking out
against excessive self-indulgence
and naming the destructive consequences of greed.
Paul put it so plainly when he said,
"if you bite and devour one another,
take care that you are not consumed by one another."

Would that we all could stop biting and devouring one another
Long enough that we could have a return to civil discourse,
To disagree without stooping to name-calling.

We who are people of faith
Have a special obligation in that regard.
We are called to be a servant people,
To bring good news to the poor and oppressed,
To model justice,
To proclaim liberty to the captives.
Can you think of a time that called for moral leadership
More than these troubled days?

Oh, what an opportunity we have,
What a responsibility we have,
To repair, to raise up, to build up,
To offer hope for all those who mourn in our midst
And beyond our shores.

The great 20th century judge and judicial philosopher Learned Hand
once asked himself,
"What is the spirit of liberty?"
In answer, he wrote these eloquent words:
The spirit of liberty
is the spirit which seeks to understand
the minds of other men and women. . .
it weighs their interests alongside its own,
it remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. . .
the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who,
2,000 years ago,
taught humanity a lesson it has never learned
but has never quite forgotten:
that there may be a kingdom
where the least shall be heard and considered
side by side with the greatest."

My friends, may our pledge of allegiance be this day
to that kind of kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.