

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, July 1, 2007
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Reading: Galatians 5:1; 13-15

Sermon Title: “Celebrating Our Freedom as the Children of God”

Sermon Text: Galatians 5:1: For freedom, Christ has set us free.

What plans do you have for the Fourth of July this Wednesday? How will you be celebrating Independence Day? What does it mean to you to be able to celebrate your freedom?

I feel sure that if we were to take the time to have everyone here this morning to answer those questions we would find a variety of responses. For some families there are many traditions associated with this particular holiday. For many it becomes not just a day to celebrate but a whole week to enjoy vacation. For some people as you think about these questions you may be thinking of new traditions which you will be establishing this year as you celebrate the Fourth of July, and the freedoms we enjoy in this land of the free. I am not sure whether this will be the first time that Jeff and Ruthanne Allen will be celebrating the Fourth of July working in a food pantry, but I know it will be a new experience for me as I work with them there this coming Wednesday morning.

Our Introit this morning, of course, has reminded us of many of the freedoms that we enjoy in this sweet land of liberty. Appropriately enough this familiar patriotic hymn was first sung on July 4, 1831, by the children’s choir at the Park Street Congregational Church in Boston, Massachusetts. Despite the fact that this hymn is such a patriotic one Samuel Francis Smith, clearly sees that freedom is not

just some great American idea or ideal. After all, he speaks not of George Washington, the father of our nation, as the author of liberty, but rather of Our Fathers' God as the Author of Liberty.

As we have heard the words of Paul as he writes to the Christians in the Churches of Galatia we would see the same truth being affirmed as he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." He sees that one of the purposes for which God sent Jesus Christ into the world is that we all might know the freedom the Author of Liberty desires for each of our lives. Unlike the children and all those who were present in Park Street Congregational Church in Boston on July 4, 1831 on Wednesday this week there will be many who will celebrate their freedom with family gatherings, or with cookouts and fireworks, or with trips to the beach, or to the mountains without giving any thought to the freedom we enjoy as being a gift from our Fathers' God, the Author of liberty.

While we cannot decide how others will celebrate their freedom we can decide how we will celebrate our freedom as the children of God. As we think about what this freedom means to us it is interesting to listen to the words of Paul when he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The yoke of slavery to which Paul is making reference is that of the Jewish law, which many people were seeking to enforce even upon Gentile Christians in the Churches of Galatia. That law had become a burden and a heavy yoke as people sought to make themselves pleasing to God through their obedience to the law. From his own experience Paul sees that it is God's love and grace divine, and the mercy of God in Jesus Christ which we can accept only by faith that makes us pleasing and acceptable to God, and nothing we have done by our own efforts at keeping the law. Like those to whom Paul first wrote we too can celebrate the fact that we are freed from the yoke of being slaves to the law of trying to put ourselves in a right relationship with God.

What then does freedom mean for Paul? As he reminds them of what God has done for them he adds, "for you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do

not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” As he found in so many places people began to think that without the yoke of slavery to the law they were free to do whatever they might choose to do to please themselves and to satisfy their own indulgences. Freedom from the law had become seen as license to do whatever one might choose to do. As they affirmed God’s grace and forgiveness they felt that they could now do just as they wished and God would still forgive them.

If Paul does not see freedom in this way, what does he see it to be? His next words are rather strange as he says, “but through love become slaves to one another.” One minute he says not to submit to the yoke of slavery and the next he says that we should become slaves. What is the difference? The difference, of course, is that of freedom. He is inviting us to use and to celebrate our freedom to become slaves of other people not because anyone compels us to do so, but because we freely choose to use our freedom in love to become the slaves of other people, as a way of fulfilling the whole law through loving our neighbor as ourselves. The words of our anthem were based on that Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. This is a prayer in which we are free to pray, “Make Me a Channel of Your Peace.” The prayer is one we are free to make. No one compels us. As we pray in this way, though, we express our desire for all our lives to be used that God’s peace might be known and experienced by other people.

I wonder how many people on the streets of Marianna or any town USA on Wednesday of this week would say that they are celebrating their freedom by becoming slaves to other people? Many people if they were asked whether they would be willing to be slaves may well think that they were being invited to engage in some kinky form of sexual activity.

Again we cannot decide how other people will celebrate their freedom, but Paul would invite us as those who claim to be the children of God to think how we are using our freedom. Are we in love seeking to serve the needs of other people?

The same question may well be asked of what does freedom mean to this nation? Is our freedom as a nation being used by all people to seek to serve the needs not just of all the people of this nation, but of the whole world?

As we think about how we might want to celebrate our freedom as individuals, and as a nation, not just on Wednesday of this week but each and every day we remember that as we come to this Table we are invited to remember the One who was most truly free, and who freely used his freedom to give himself in love even to the point of death to serve us and the people of the whole world. We come to remember the way in which he freely gave himself in life and in death to show how much he loved us and cared for us and wanted us to know through faith in him that we are indeed the children of God. As we come we remember that his parting gift to us is of the Holy Spirit to enable us to know his gift of freedom, and also to enable us freely to use our freedom in love for others as he has freely given himself for us. As we remember the way in which the Holy Spirit has been given to us to enable us to truly celebrate our freedom as the children of God, and as we seek to become in love slaves of other people let us affirm again our trust in that Spirit's power in our own lives using the words of affirmation printed in the bulletin. Let us stand and affirm our faith together..

Affirmation of Faith *from the Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the church. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.