

## “For you were called to freedom...”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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Today and for the next few weeks our summer tour of the Bible takes us into the New Testament epistles. Galatians is the most familiar of the ones we'll be looking at. This is one of the epistles with the apostle Paul's name on it that most scholars agree *was* actually written by Paul. It probably dates from about the year 50 C. E. and is addressed to the “churches of Galatia,” (a part of modern-day Turkey) though no specific people or cities are mentioned.

We usually think of these writings collected in the New Testament as theological essays (or, perhaps if we are more honest, as dense, complicated, hard-to-understand theology, in run-on sentences, with a bit of sexism thrown in here and there!). Biblical scholars, preachers, and amateur students of the Bible tend to mine these writings for material to construct or support beliefs about salvation, Christian living, and the nature of the church.

But we understand Galatians and the other writings like it better when we approach them on their own terms, and remember that they are *epistles*. Not abstract theology but *letters* written in specific circumstances and for specific reasons. That doesn't mean they don't contain some well-thought-through and organized theology. But it does mean taking into account that at points the writers are responding in the moment. They may not be thinking about carefully crafting an essay as they pour out their concerns, give advice, and try to explain what *they* understand of the faith in terms their correspondents can relate to.

In Galatians, Paul wades into the biggest conflict in the early church: over whether the increasing number of Gentile followers of Jesus should be expected to adopt all the practices of traditional Judaism, including, particularly, circumcision. The beginning of the epistle to the Galatians is a vociferous defense of his calling and ministry and especially his position that Christian faith doesn't require anybody to convert to Judaism first. The Christians in Galatia know where he stands; he helped to found those congregations, and instilled the same conviction in them. But now others have introduced the controversy there, and Paul's heard about it. So he writes this letter that even feels like it was written in a passionate hurry, telling the Galatian Christians that they're “foolish” and have been “bewitched” by people who “want to pervert the gospel.” It's not “works of the law,” he says, that have brought them salvation and the presence of God's Spirit, but faith. In the middle part of the epistle, he expounds on this – the heart of his theology - at some length. But when it comes right down to it, Paul's less concerned about the theology the Galatian Christian *believe* than about the theology they *live*.

The key principle Paul lays out here is *freedom* in Christ.

Freedom is a fraught concept. It is for us, and it was for the early church, too. Paul seems to know this. On the one hand, he's firmly convinced that the new life Christ calls his disciples into doesn't come from religious rituals, adhering to rules, or anxious attention to getting these sorts of things right. Maybe the seeming security offered by clear structure and expectations

has an appeal, but to Paul it's false security. It's giving up the promise of the gospel for something that offers less. It's choosing to be bound instead of free. He wants more for these folks he cares about.

On the other hand, Paul's aware of how easily freedom can be misconstrued and misused, too. Having said that Christian faith is about freedom, and not obedience to the laws of Judaism, he feels he has to address the inevitable: that some people will latch on to "freedom" as justification for doing whatever they want.

Freedom's not as simple as it might sound. Don't we know this only too well?

We cherish our freedoms – to think, worship, speak our minds, move about freely in the world, protect our privacy, choose our work and our partners, have a say in decisions that affect our lives, to pursue dreams. And we cherish the ideals of a free nation: democracy, equality, human rights, justice for all, opportunity.

And yet, alongside that cherishing of freedom, there is another reality, which we sometimes don't pay a lot of attention to: that many, many of us are much less than free. Most obviously, of course, the United States has the highest rates of incarceration in the world. People's freedoms are restricted in many other ways, legal and illegal, from labor trafficking to anti-gay laws to encroachment on tribal lands. But also - all around us are people enslaved to poverty, debt, and systems of oppression; people in bondage to addiction, captivated by consumerism, driven by 24-7 ambition; people trapped in toxic relationships, stuck in soul-killing jobs, burdened with responsibilities, mired in guilt, or trying to live up to impossible expectations; people paralyzed or driven by fear; people caught up in anger and hate, lies and denial. There are so many ways to lose, or give up, freedom.

And at the same time, there are many ways to misrepresent and misuse freedom, to abuse the very idea of it:

Too often, "freedom" seems to mean "free to exploit" others. Free to exclude. Free to say anything no matter how hateful or untrue. Free to get as much of everything as you can – money, stuff, power, fun. Free to walk away from responsibilities. Free to opt out of any interest in the common good. Free to distance yourself from your neighbors' need. Free of any boundaries, rules, or limits. Free to refuse the gifts of freedom to others.

What might Paul say? I can only imagine how scathing he might be at the sometimes trivial, sometimes dangerously selfish ways freedom is defined in our culture. But I don't think he'd say anything very different from what he said to the Galatians. I think he'd expect those of us who follow Jesus to be able to thread our way through the minefield of "freedom" - to discern the difference between the freedom that centers the unlimited self and the freedom that is in Christ.

"For you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom for selfish purposes."

What is freedom for?

Freedom is for serving one another in love.

Freedom is for a life that is *not* enslaved to things like idolatries, anger, substance abuse, short-lived pleasure, greed, self-centeredness.

Freedom is for welcoming the Spirit whose presence cultivates in us things like love, joy, generosity, and faithfulness. Those are expansive things, ways of being in the world that don't close us off but open us up, connect us, enlarge us, make us less fearful and more whole. There are a million ways to live the fruits of the Spirit. That's freedom in Christ.

I re-read Mary Oliver's wonderful poem, "The Summer Day" this week, in honor of the summer solstice (you can read it in our church newsletter). The last line goes like this:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

Paul might ask us, "what is it you plan to do with your freedom?"

This 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, I urge us all to think about that question.  
What will you do with your freedom in Christ?

Let go of guilt? Release yourself from the need for perfection? Ask more questions? Be ok with not having all the answers? Raise children with faith that's joyful instead of judgmental? Make art? Strive for less screen time? Find ways to support freedom for others? Live more simply? Follow your generous impulses more often? Advocate unapologetically for the poor? Work less? Love more? Admit you need help, and get it? Breathe deeply? Rest? Say "yes" more often? Say "no" sometimes? Do that thing you've been feeling a call to? Make more room at the table? There are a million ways to go.

What will you do with that wild and precious freedom?