

Pentecost V (Proper 8C RCL Year C)
June 27, 2001

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal. 5:1f NRSV)

For the past few weeks, our second reading has been from Paul's epistle -- his letter -- to the Galatians. It is undisputedly one of the most important documents in the body of Christian scripture, and is often referred to as the Magna Charta of Christian liberty.

Let me put on my teacher hat for a moment and remind you of the background to this letter. Paul was the founder of the new Christian church in the region of Central Asia Minor known as Galatia. Some time after he had left to continue his missionary work, other teachers moved into the fledgling church and began to teach that in addition to believing in Jesus Christ, Christians were also obligated to keep the Law of Moses; that is, the Jewish law. When Paul got wind of this development, he shot off this letter.

It's very readable and accessible, and I commend it to you for your personal reading. If possible, read it all in one sitting, like you would an actual letter sent to you. The principles Paul puts forth in these six short chapters were largely responsible for making Christianity a world religion instead of simply a Jewish sect.

One of the main themes of the letter is freedom verses slavery. For Paul, faith in Jesus is the only thing necessary for salvation. Faith in Jesus now takes the place of the Law. That's the freedom Paul is urging the Galatians to remember.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5, NRSV)

This one law, for Paul, is synonymous with faith in Christ. It is the law of love, which manifested in Jesus himself.

Paul goes on: *Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit*

desires is opposed to the flesh... if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

Now, the terms "spirit" and "flesh" have been subject to more MISinterpretation than practically any other bit of scripture. It's usually interpreted as Spirit being all things esoteric, otherworldly, mystical, heavenly and holy. Flesh is usually associated with all things physical and material, earthly and evil.

If you're like me, you grew up with a kind of black-and-white understanding what Paul meant by *the flesh* and *the spirit*; the main thing being that *the flesh* was all about lust and misbehaving' (and we all knew what that meant!), and *the spirit* was all about being pietistic and holier-than-thou.

But for Paul, these were complex and subtle ideas. For Paul, *spirit* means the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. It means living in this world – as the wonderfully made human beings that God created – filled with grace and the image of the Divine.

Flesh, on the other hand... living by the flesh, he might say, is to be disconnected from God's Spirit, which results in broken and destructive living.

So it's freedom or slavery. Freedom in Christ; slavery to the law. And for Paul, there is only one choice: freedom. But the urgency, the very insistence of this letter to his flock, reveals how easily they were seduced by the law. Freedom was so much harder! And this isn't just limited to the Galatians. We, too, are seduced by the law. Freedom is harder.

In the Stephen King movie, "Shawshank Redemption," the character played by Morgan Freeman, who goes by the nickname Red, narrates throughout the story. At one point in the narration, he speaks of a phenomenon of prison life. "These walls are kind of funny," he drawls. "First you hate `em, then you get used to `em. Enough time passes, gets so you depend on `em. That's institutionalized."

This observation sets the stage for what happens to Brooks. Brooks, you remember, is the old librarian who's been on the inside for decades. When he's paroled, he lives in a half-way house and works at a grocery store, but he doesn't know how to do it. He doesn't know how to be on his own, how to function on the outside, without the structure of the institution. He doesn't know how to be free.

He dreams of buying a gun and holding up the grocery store, maybe shooting the manager, so they'll send him home. "Home," he says. Not just "back," but "home." In the end, he hangs himself. He carves his initials on the ceiling beam, and hangs himself. He doesn't know how to be free.

In reflection, it would serve us well to remember that the Law is nothing if not an institution.

But isn't the law an institution we need? Given that we human beings are so in need of guidance and protection from our sinfulness?

The issue, I think Paul would say, is whether it is the law – or love – that saves us. And the answer is always: love.

The law may be a plumb line, a way to gauge how we're doing or to guide us along the right way. But the law will never save us, not even from ourselves. Only the law of love can do that; the love of God in Christ Jesus. And that love is perfect freedom.

But what does it mean to be free? Not self-indulgence, says Paul, which is what he means by living by the flesh. And if we are living self-indulgently, it's obvious. Paul lists the evidence: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. These are Paul's words.

We might better understand them as

- exploitation of our bodies,
- living without regard for restraint,
- valuing things more than God,
- believing in magic (which is trying to control God),
- treating others as enemies,
- striving to always be right (that is, one-up on everybody else),
- being jealous and angry and quarrelsome,
- provoking dissension and creating factions,
- envying what others have to the point of bitterness --
- and then there's drunkenness and carousing, which we understand clearly enough.

No wonder Christians have tended to focus on the suggestive words like fornication... and glide right over the rest, the ones that really call us up short! Because, according to Paul, when those things are present in our lives, it is evidence that we aren't living in the Spirit of God.

If we are living in the Spirit, that's equally clear. It's characterized by what Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit":

- love, joy, peace,
- patience, kindness, generosity,
- faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These, too, are Paul's words; but these need no explanation. If these things are evident in us, in our lives, it is proof positive that we are living in the Spirit, and nothing, no law, can supercede the condition of living in the Spirit.

When this *living in the spirit* seems impossibly difficult, I take comfort in the knowledge that Paul himself was converted from law to grace; from slavery to freedom. And I suspect he would have loved the symbolism to be found in an abbey in North Carolina, and their very special baptismal font.

It seems that when the monks were first building the abbey, they found a large granite stone that stood at the intersection of two roads near their site. Curious about the unusual stone, they investigated and found out that over a century ago, men, women, and children would stand on that stone and be sold into slavery.

The monks took the stone and hollowed out a bowl in the top. They brought it into their chapel to be their baptismal font. Now carved on the stone are these words: "Upon this rock, men once were sold into slavery. Now upon this rock, through the waters of baptism, men become free children of God."

This is the law of love: that even hearts of stone can become fonts of freedom. This is the freedom we find in Christ Jesus: that nothing else matters but love. It trumps even scripture, reason, and tradition; it ultimately solves all problems; it surpasses theology and doctrine. Most importantly of all: it erases fear and despair.

How do we know when we are living by this law of love? By these things in our lives: **Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Generosity. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control.**

Amen

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