



**July 1, 2007**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

## “Let’s Celebrate Freedom”

Coming up in just three days is one of the great festivals of American tradition: Independence Day; the Fourth of July. On that day we may picnic in a park, gather with friends or family members, play with sparklers and snakes, or watch a local fireworks display. I’d like to remind us to pause at some point on that day to feel gratitude for our freedoms: freedom from foreign domination or occupation, freedom from being FORBIDDEN to worship God, freedom from being FORCED to belong to a religious organization, freedom from governmental violation of our personal and communal rights. As a people of faith, WE are called to thank GOD for these freedoms, as well as celebrating the people of our nation who have made them possible.

Today, in our worship, we also give thanks to God for our freedom as Christians. That never made sense to me as I grew up in the church. When taught that we are SET FREE by Christ, I was mightily puzzled. Nothing about church seemed free to me at all. Religion seemed to be full of DON’Ts that limited my freedom: Don’t talk during worship, or even whisper loudly; don’t put your feet on the pews or stretch out for a nap; don’t fight with other kids, or yell at them for being mean; don’t sass your parents; on and on it went.

As I’ve grown to adulthood and matured in faith, I HAVE learned to perceive how following Christ is indeed a road to freedom.

Let’s reflect on the Apostle Paul’s remarks read this morning from his letter to the early church in the ancient region of Galatia.

The whole letter of Galatians is an argument Paul presents against the teaching of a rival group, often called the Judaizers. The Judaizers had gained considerable influence over the Galatian Christians. Remember that the church began as a sect within Judaism. The church was a group of Jewish persons who claimed Jesus as the Messiah. The Judaizers were those Christian Jews who maintained that converts to Christianity must convert to Judaism to be followers of Jesus. They had to accept and follow all Jewish law. This included circumcision for all males.

In Chapter 5 of this letter, read from this morning, Paul makes a clear statement: The Galatians should not be forced to submit to circumcision. The Judaizers insistence that this ritual be observed was contrary to Christian freedom, according to Paul. Paul teaches that a mark in human flesh, signifying our bond to God, is no longer necessary. The evidence of our connection to God is to be **OUR LIVES THEMSELVES**, which display the faith in our hearts. In other words, Paul says we are free of traditions and rituals that are **ONLY** outward signs---- what counts is what's in our hearts and what's lived out day by day. Love, displayed in service to others, is the evidence we are followers of Jesus.

Let's think about my childhood church experiences. Christ really has set us free. I'm not bound to a **RULE** that says Christians can't stretch out on the pews during worship to take naps when they are tired. We don't stretch out on the pews to nap because it would disturb others in our worship gathering. Concern for others is what guides us, not a specific rule.

As Christians we are free--- Christ does not bind us to him. **WE** choose to draw close to him. The Fourth of July is a great time to add this understanding of freedom to our celebrations. We can celebrate the paradox at the center of the Christian faith: we are most free when we are most closely linked to Christ. The more closely we are bound to his side, the more freedom we experience.

We may have trouble at times seeing how this works, but try this test, offered to us by Rev. Leonard Sweet:

When do you feel better about yourself?

After a restful afternoon watching a televised game as a couch potato----

OR after an exhausting afternoon coaching a Little League game?

After whipping up one of your favorite desserts in the kitchen-----

OR after delivering it to a shut-in member of your church or a neighbor?

After a special "night on the town"-----

OR after an evening serving a meal at a homeless shelter?

Christ gives us freedom:

From the tyranny of television

From the rat race of trying to amuse ourselves and flee from boredom

From the rat race of trying to prove our value, through things like:

-the accumulation of wealth

-social status

-good looks

-professional success.

This is how Christ sets us free from all the rules and voices that compete for our attention:

**Christ tells us that the WHOLE LAW----- everything we need in terms of rules to guide our lives---- is found in this one simple statement: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

Jesus sets us free FROM many things. But we need to take the next step. Jesus sets us free TO be and do all that God has created us to be and do. That’s a crucial truth about freedom.

This Fourth of July we are called by God to celebrate our freedom TO..... as much as our freedom FROM...

On a national and global scale, we need to remember that celebrating our freedom FROM oppression and tyranny is not the whole story. The drafters of the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution knew this. They worked long and hard, risking their LIVES, to come up with what we have to DO to make this freedom work. We are free TO govern, TO serve, TO defend, TO protect, TO honor, and TO be loyal to the commitment to freedom and justice for all.

The difference between “freedom FROM” and “freedom TO” is close to the distinction made when we talk about RIGHTS carrying with them RESPONSIBILITIES. Our RIGHT to live in dignity, free from injustice and oppression, carries with it a RESPONSIBILITY to live and act in ways that protect and safeguard those freedoms

Jesus’ teachings extend this beyond a national holiday for us who call ourselves Christians. On the Fourth of July, we celebrate FREEDOM. We celebrate with picnics, reunions, fireworks.

On the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth—every day of July, and of August, September, October, well, you get the idea--- we celebrate the freedom given to us by Jesus Christ. How do we celebrate CHRISTIAN freedom? By making choices that serve God and our neighbors. We celebrate our freedom by USING that freedom to act to bring justice to all God's people.

As we lift our hearts in thanksgiving for our national freedoms this year, let's remember God's people around our world. Many do not live with even an attempt to provide justice in the part of their governments. In our nation we know the application of justice is not perfect—but we hold it as an ideal and seek to design laws that safeguard it. If freedom is good for US, then we must pray and work for the same freedoms for OTHERS, all around the world.

As we leave church today, pray we'll go with a new or renewed awareness of the value of our freedoms—especially the freedom given to us by Jesus Christ. May we go and USE that freedom, in love and service to others. And remember the closer we are to Christ, the clearer his voice becomes. The voices coming from our televisions, our newspapers, our teachers, employers—even our friends and family members—those voices will drop in volume, so that Jesus' voice becomes strong and clear. God alone can be trusted to show us the way to live, treasuring and safeguarding FREEDOM.

As part of a much longer quiz on American history there appeared this question: *Name a distinguished foreigner who was of substantial aid to the American colonists during the Revolutionary War.* Try as he might, one of the students simply could not come up with a name. Still drawing a blank as the papers were being collected, in desperation he remembered his grandmother telling him that when in trouble, he could "try God". So, he scribbled his answer, "*It was God.*"

The answer is a good one. Whenever and wherever justice and freedom are being sought, whenever and wherever love for neighbors is manifested--- God is there. Always. You can't keep him out! Let's celebrate our freedom to stay by his side--- now and forever! Amen.