

Pentecost 5C 2010

Proper 8

Texts: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Psalm 77: 1-2, 11-20

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Galatians 5:1, 13

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Here we are in week four of our study of Galatians. We will wrap up the book next week with a sermon on chapter six, but today we are in chapter five. Some of you may remember that last week we were in chapter three; so what happened to chapter four? I have no idea.

I don't know why the theologians and scholars who put together the Revised Common Lectionary decided to leave it out, but they did. I will very briefly summarize it for you and then go into the meat of Galatians, the fulcrum on which Paul's argument turns, which is our reading for today.

Last week Paul told the Galatians that it was God's grace and faithfulness that called them into the covenant people and nothing else; all distinctions that separated them were made irrelevant in Christ.

The Jewish-Christian missionaries that had come after Paul told the Galatians that in order to be full members of the community they needed to be circumcised and follow Torah observance.

Paul argued that to do so would relegate them to second-class members of the covenant and would negate God's free gift of Grace. If Law observance could save them than Christ's death on the cross was for nothing. The Law had been necessary before Christ, but since Christ was the living embodiment and fulfillment of the Law, the Law was no longer needed.

Paul argued that Abraham believed first and then the Law came. Faith brought forth the Law; Law did not bring about faith. I told you that it

was God's faithfulness in keeping God's promises that brought Abraham out of the land of Ur. And it was Abraham's faith that God would keep God's promises that blessed him and his descendents. Because faith came first and because the Galatians had faith they were invited into God's chosen people. It was, and is, all about faith.

Chapter three ends with some of the most beautiful and difficult words of the Bible: "In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs to the promise." (3:28-29)

In Chapter four Paul takes this further. Because an heir has inheritance rights and a slave does not, the Galatians can either claim their inheritance, their belonging in Christ, or decide to remain as slaves.

But after tasting the Spirit given to them in Christ why would they want to go back into slavery? If they had been adopted as heirs then they have been invited into an intimate relationship with God. The relationship between the Galatians and God is no longer like slave and master but rather like father and son.

Now we come to chapter five. I told you when we began this series that Galatians is one of the most important books of the New Testament. In it is the crystallization of Gentile Christian theology. Galatians has been called the "Magna Carta of the Christian faith" with Chapter five being Paul's emancipation proclamation.

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not fall back into a yoke of slavery. 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."

I wrote extensively on what freedom in the Christian sense means in my Rector's Ramblings column that is coming out this week. You could consider that column part two of this sermon. What I want to reinforce today is what Christian freedom is not.

Christian freedom is not individual autonomy. It is not the belief that I can do what I want when I want to. This was one of the concerns of the Jewish-Christian missionaries. If the Law was no longer necessary what was stopping the Galatians from falling into immorality and lawlessness? If the Law is no longer necessary, what is stopping us from doing the same?

Often times when freedom is given there is a corresponding pushback. Because freedom is just that, free, things are less predictable and the need for more structure is keenly felt. That is really just human nature.

This is what the missionaries argued for and what made so much sense to the Galatians. You see this same tension being struggled with in our Church and the Anglican Communion today. How much freedom is too much freedom? What does it mean to be a community based on faith and grace and how is that lived out in our faith communities?

These are hard, hard questions as we in the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion are finding out. But rest assured we are not the only church in Christendom wrestling with these questions.

Christian freedom is not liberty. Christians are not at liberty to do whatever they think they need to do in the name of God. We have seen the disastrous results when the need to defend God is seen as more important than love of neighbor.

And really now, is it not more than a little arrogant to think that we peons could defend God? God, the creator of all life and the cosmos, the Conquer of death, does not need our attempts to defend God's honor and name. We are not responsible for God's protection. God is perfectly capable of taking care of God's self. To put ourselves into God's place, to make ourselves more important than God, is the very definition of pride and sin.

We are, however, responsible *to* God and *for* one another and creation. When we reverse the two, when we believe we are responsible for God and God is responsible for our neighbors, very bad things happen.

When we do this we live in our own righteousness and not God's. When we do this we relegate God to the great street sweeper that comes along

after the parade to clean up our messes. That is not how we are asked to live in this world.

Christian freedom is also not easy. To live lovingly with one another, to live with others that we find prickly, misguided, or just plain wrong is hard to do. We don't like it when others reflect what is in ourselves. To live with others in love is to accept difference, to accept each other's rough edges.

I heard another priest say that we are like a bunch of rough stones in God's pocket. Each stone needs the other stones in order to be rubbed smooth. If we only live with others that have the same shape as we do our edges remain sharp and may become even sharper.

St. Paul reminds us that in going after one another we need be careful lest we "devour one another and be consumed by one another." There are no winners when Christians go after one another, or anyone else for that matter. Both parties suffer.

All of these examples are examples of living in the "flesh." They are all signs of ongoing enslavement. This is the "yoke of slavery" that St. Paul refers to. This is not the freedom that has been won for us in the cross of Christ.

Why did the Galatians fall back into the yoke of slavery and why do we? Because it is what we know. It is literally dancing with the devil that we know. And it is, quite frankly, easier.

Freedom is hard work. It entails risk. It asks of us different behaviors that are uncomfortable for us, that require more of us and lifts us up out of ourselves. Freedom is dying to what we know and living into what Christ has done for us.

To live as we know is to choose the yoke of slavery. To live in Christ is to live in the Spirit and to take on the mantle of freedom. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot say we want to live as we want and live in God's freedom. We cannot be self-centered and God-centered at the same time.

To live freely, to claim the gift of freedom that God has given to us, we must live not for ourselves, but for others. To live freely is to “be liberated from the prison of me, myself and I...to be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self, to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service.”¹

Christian freedom is not autonomy. Christian freedom is not liberty. Christian freedom is not easy. But, it is life giving. It is God-centered and it is grounded in God’s love for us and in our love for God and our neighbor.

Amen.

¹ Dr. Joanna Adams, Day 1, broadcast July 1, 2007. www.day1.org/1049-the_predicament_of_freedom.