

Consecration Sunday, June 30, 2019

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Freedom of Christ, Freedom in Christ

Galatians 5:1, 13–26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

5¹ FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE; STAND FIRM THEREFORE, AND DO NOT SUBMIT AGAIN TO A YOKE OF SLAVERY. . . . 13 FOR YOU WERE CALLED TO FREEDOM, BROTHERS. ONLY DO NOT USE YOUR FREEDOM AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE FLESH, BUT THROUGH LOVE SERVE ONE ANOTHER. 14 FOR THE WHOLE LAW IS FULFILLED IN ONE WORD: “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” 15 BUT IF YOU BITE AND DEVOUR ONE ANOTHER, WATCH OUT THAT YOU ARE NOT CONSUMED BY ONE ANOTHER. 16 BUT I SAY, WALK BY THE SPIRIT, AND YOU WILL NOT GRATIFY THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH. 17 FOR THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH ARE AGAINST THE SPIRIT, AND THE DESIRES OF THE SPIRIT ARE AGAINST THE FLESH, FOR THESE ARE OPPOSED TO EACH OTHER, TO KEEP YOU FROM DOING THE THINGS YOU WANT TO DO. 18 BUT IF YOU ARE LED BY THE SPIRIT, YOU ARE NOT UNDER THE LAW. 19 NOW THE WORKS OF THE FLESH ARE EVIDENT: SEXUAL IMMORALITY, IMPURITY, SENSUALITY, 20 IDOLATRY, SORcery, ENMITY, STRIFE, JEALOUSY, FITS OF ANGER, RIVALRIES, DISSENSIONS, DIVISIONS, 21 ENVY, DRUNKENNESS, ORGIES, AND THINGS LIKE THESE. I WARN YOU, AS I WARNED YOU BEFORE, THAT THOSE WHO DO SUCH THINGS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD. 22 BUT THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, 23 GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL; AGAINST SUCH THINGS THERE IS NO LAW. 24 AND THOSE WHO BELONG TO CHRIST JESUS HAVE CRUCIFIED THE FLESH WITH ITS PASSIONS AND DESIRES. 25 IF WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT, LET US ALSO KEEP IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT. 26 LET US NOT BECOME CONCEITED, PROVOKING ONE ANOTHER, ENVYING ONE ANOTHER.

Freedom is a fitting topic for Fourth of July week. Those who came before us made costly sacrifices for the political freedoms we enjoy today. The Bill of Rights names these basic freedoms, starting with the “first freedom,” the free exercise or practice of religion, followed by the freedom of speech, the freedom of the press, the freedom to assemble, and the freedom to petition the government. Living in the United States,

these freedoms are our heritage. They are precious. They are worth preserving. As you celebrate the Fourth of July, thank God for them.

Freedom is also a theme St. Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia, but freedom of a different kind. He isn't interested in political freedom or the freedoms found in the Bill of Rights but on what it means to be free in Christ, often called Christian freedom. Consecration Sunday at Our Savior is a fitting time to consider the freedom we have in Christ and then to consider how and for what purpose we will use our freedom. Stated in a simple way, it's like this:

*CHRIST JESUS
HAS SET US FREE FROM SIN
TO SERVE ONE ANOTHER
THROUGH LOVE.*

I.

Christian freedom begins with Christ Jesus our Lord. FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE (v 1). YOU WERE CALLED TO FREEDOM (v 13). By whom? By God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. What this means is that now, as Christians, we BELONG TO CHRIST JESUS (v 24). Now WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT (v 25).

Christ Jesus is the one who sets us free because He Himself is totally and completely free. He is the best, the perfect picture of what true spiritual freedom looks like, and of what this freedom looks like as it's lived out among sinners in a fallen world. Though we don't typically think of Jesus like this, He is the freest person who ever lived! He was free even when He was arrested and bound by ropes. He was free even when He was led captive before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate and Herod. He was free even when He was pinned to the cross. He was free even when His body was shut up in the grave.

I realize this doesn't *look* much like freedom, certainly not the kind of freedom we celebrate on the Fourth of July. So in what way is Jesus free? He is free to love both God and His neighbor. There's nothing coiled in Jesus. Nothing turned or curved in on itself. Nothing selfish or sinful. He's completely open to God, completely at the service of man. He's fully able to love and serve and—what's more—He even *wants* to love and serve. He isn't forced to do any of it. The only force and power at work in His life is the force and power of love!

Christ Jesus is loved by His Father, and so He has the freedom of a Son in relationship with His Father. At His baptism, the Father declared: "YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON;

WITH YOU I'M WELL PLEASED" (Lk 3:22). He didn't have to earn His Father's favor. He already had it. Loved by His Father, He prayed, He lived, He suffered, and He offered His life on behalf of others.

This is how Jesus speaks of Himself:

- While being arrested, He said, "DO YOU THINK THAT I CANNOT APPEAL TO MY FATHER, AND HE WILL AT ONCE SEND ME MORE THAN TWELVE LEGIONS OF ANGELS?" (Mt 26:53).
- "NO ONE TAKES my life FROM ME, BUT I LAY IT DOWN OF MY OWN ACCORD" (Jn 10:18).
- "THE SON OF MAN CAME . . . TO GIVE HIS LIFE AS A RANSOM FOR MANY" (Mk 10:45).

What's surprising and hardly believable is that Jesus chooses to use His freedom like this. Who in their right mind would freely give their life for others? We think of freedom as keeping a firm hold on life. As being free to live and do whatever *we* want. Freedom is about me and what I get to do. Freedom, we think, is for serving ourselves. But Jesus calls that bondage. EVERYONE WHO COMMITS SIN IS A SLAVE TO SIN (Jn 8:34) and can only serve themselves. Selfishness is *not* freedom. Jesus was so free that He wanted to give away His life.

And He did. With THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD UPON Him, as the ANOINTED One (Lk 4:18), He freely tied His life to our selfishness and self-centeredness, to every thought, word, and deed by which we serve ourselves instead of others, and He paid the price for it. He offered Himself in your place in slavery to death and hell. His costly sacrifice won the spiritual freedom we enjoy today. IF THE SON SETS YOU FREE, YOU WILL BE FREE INDEED (Jn 8:36).

II.

So because of Christ Jesus, you are free—free from the mastery of sin, death, and the devil. Christian freedom is the freedom of Christ Jesus. His freedom is yours. In Holy Baptism, we were joined to Jesus SO THAT WE RECEIVE ADOPTION AS SONS. AND BECAUSE YOU ARE SONS, GOD HAS SENT THE SPIRIT OF HIS SON INTO OUR HEARTS, CRYING, "ABBA! FATHER!" SO YOU ARE NO LONGER A SLAVE, BUT A SON, AND IF A SON, THAN AN HEIR (Gal 4:4–7). Christ Jesus has taken our sins away. His Spirit has come and continues to come into our hearts. His Father is our Father in heaven.

This is what leads St. Paul to warn the Christians in Galatia, and to warn us, about two dangers or threats to our freedom. The first danger is submitting AGAIN TO A YOKE

OF SLAVERY (v 1) and the second danger is using FREEDOM AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE sinful FLESH (v 13).

First, STAND FIRM, AND DO NOT SUBMIT AGAIN TO A YOKE OF SLAVERY (v 1). Because we are free, we are no longer to view our lives or to live them as though we are under a burden. The whole law, everything that God demands of us, has already been fulfilled by the One who loved His neighbor as Himself. You are already a beloved child of the heavenly Father. There's nothing you need to do to earn His favor or to make Him more pleased with you. Christ sets us free from living by the law to go way past what the law demands!

Second, your sinful nature would just *love* to use this freedom to its own advantage. YOU WERE CALLED TO FREEDOM. Freedom is your calling, your vocation. ONLY DON'T USE YOUR FREEDOM AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE FLESH, as a base for its war against Christ, BUT THROUGH LOVE SERVE ONE ANOTHER (v 13). Christian freedom doesn't mean being able to do whatever your sinful nature wants to do. It means being able to put to death the sinful nature and do whatever Christ Jesus wants to do in and through you.

In other words, Christian freedom *never* looks at itself or what it wants. It looks at the neighbor and what he or she needs. At what would be good for him. At what would be best for her. At what would serve and help them. It doesn't want its own good but their good! In fact, the point of Christian freedom isn't that we keep ourselves entirely free but that we freely step into our relationships and responsibilities. It sets us free *for* others, free to love and serve them.

Our sinful nature hates this. It wars against us and against what is good and godly. I SAY, WALK BY THE SPIRIT, AND YOU WON'T GRATIFY THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH. FOR THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH ARE AGAINST THE SPIRIT, AND THE DESIRES OF THE SPIRIT ARE AGAINST THE FLESH, FOR THESE ARE OPPOSED TO EACH OTHER, TO KEEP YOU FROM DOING THE THINGS YOU WANT TO DO. BUT IF YOU ARE LED BY THE SPIRIT, YOU ARE NOT UNDER THE LAW (vv 16–18).

III.

To follow our own sinful desires is not freedom but servitude. NOW THE WORKS OF THE FLESH ARE EVIDENT: SEXUAL IMMORALITY, IMPURITY, SENSUALITY, IDOLATRY, SORCERY, ENMITY, STRIFE, JEALOUSY, FITS OF ANGER, RIVALRIES, DISSENSIONS, DIVISIONS, ENVY, DRUNKENNESS, ORGIES, AND THINGS LIKE THESE. I WARN YOU, AS I WARNED YOU BEFORE, THAT THOSE WHO DO SUCH THINGS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD (vv 19–21). Listen to this

word! Let it do its work in your life, drive you to repentance, condemn and crucify these desires in you, and create in you the fear of God.

BUT THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL; AGAINST SUCH THINGS THERE IS NO LAW. AND THOSE WHO BELONG TO CHRIST JESUS HAVE CRUCIFIED THE FLESH WITH ITS PASSIONS AND DESIRES. IF WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT, LET US ALSO KEEP IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT. LET US NOT BECOME CONCEITED, PROVOKING ONE ANOTHER, ENVYING ONE ANOTHER (vv 22–26).

While the sinful flesh leads to divisions, the Holy Spirit unites and builds up the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us with a gentle and loving grasp, as when a child puts her hand into the hand of a beloved and trusted father. As we hear, learn, meditate on God's word, the Holy Spirit works in us. The seed takes root in our lives. It bears much fruit. We learn to imitate and follow Christ and His freedom, even to lay down our lives for others.

What I crave, and I think you do too, isn't the freedom to do whatever I want but the freedom to live according to God's plan, design, and purposes for me. The freedom to do what He wants me to do. NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS (Lk 22:42). That the way Psalm 110 describes Christ's people would describe you and me: "YOUR PEOPLE WILL OFFER THEMSELVES FREELY ON THE DAY OF YOUR POWER, IN HOLY GARMENTS" (Ps 110:3). Jesus graciously rules over our lives. He clothes us with His righteousness. He turns us into freewill offerings to God.

What does all this have to do with Consecration Sunday? Today we offer ourselves in service to our brothers and sisters in this congregation. We put our freedom to work, not for our own sake but for others. We offer ourselves in Christian freedom to mop the basement on Saturday evenings or to sit with crying babies on Sunday morning so their parents can be in the service. We use our freedom to visit the sick, to feed the hungry, to comfort the discouraged and dying. We pull weeds so that people may see the beauty of our church and be drawn to the beauty of Christ. We lay down our lives, give of our time, serve with our energy, and offer our worldly goods for one another and for other sinners for whom Jesus died. We are also called to serve in our homes and families and communities. Let us not neglect to walk by the Spirit in all these places as well.

This is the greatest freedom we could possibly have. We are free because we BELONG TO CHRIST JESUS (v 24). We are free because WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT (v 25). Enjoy this freedom and use it for the good of others! AND I AM SURE OF THIS, THAT HE

WHO BEGAN A GOOD WORK IN YOU WILL BRING IT TO COMPLETION AT THE DAY OF JESUS CHRIST (Phil 1:6).

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
