

“One in Christ Jesus”
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Sunday, June 26, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

A boy, frustrated with all the rules he had to follow, asked his father, “Dad, how soon will I be old enough to do as I please?”

His father answered, “I don’t know. Nobody has lived that long yet.”

Today we continue our reflections on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In this letter, one of Paul’s main themes is the scope of Christian freedom. Are we bound by the Law, or not?

John Henry Newman wrote, in 1864, “Liberty of thought is in itself a good; but it gives an opening to false liberty.” And Thomas Huxley wrote, in 1902, “A man’s worst difficulties begin when he is able to do as he likes.”

This is exactly Paul’s dilemma in the passage we are looking at today. Yes, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Such a wonderful statement. We are set free, to be free!

“Only,” Paul continues, “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.”

This struggle is ongoing in the Christian faith, and continues until today. We are free in Christ, but how shall we use our freedom? How shall we nurture the fruits of the Spirit that Paul names, and avoid the works of the flesh that he denounces? How shall we avoid the extremes of freedom run wild, or control clamped down too tight? How shall we find joy in the expansiveness of true freedom in Christ?

This is what Paul wrestles with in today’s reading from the letter to the Galatians.

I. The Gate Test

Dr. William Bennett, when he was U. S. Secretary of Education, got some tough questions at his lecture series to 7th graders.

For example, a 7th grade boy asked, “How can you tell a good country from a bad country?”

Dr. Bennet answered: “The gate test. If the gate is open, which way do the people run?”

Paul says Jesus opened the gate. He opened all the gates, freeing everyone from whatever held them in bondage. But the circumcision party thought their bondage – the Law – was ordained by God for everyone for all time.

During the Cold War someone asked, “How many Jews are there in Russia?”

“About 3 million.”

“And if all the Jews were allowed to leave, how many of them would go?”

“About 200 million.”

The gate test.

Jesus has opened all the gates. We are freed from our bondage to the Law and our bondage to sin, if we will only claim that freedom. We can be free in Christ, no matter our circumstances. And we can support the cause of freedom for all people, in this life and the next.

II. My Dinner with Andre (& geckos)

Geckos are cute, fascinating creatures. They appear on T-shirts, towels, key-chains, and pot holders. They appear in TV commercials and in the stuffed toy market.

In real life, when a gecko’s tail breaks off, the lizard grows another.

This could be a parable about freedom. Sometimes freedom can only come when something is lost or let go of. We have to give up something old in order to get something new.

For the Galatians, Paul is saying that they must give up the Law. They must give up their petrified principles. They must let go of their monstrous morals that, for example, allow the righteous to ignore the poor and the sick on the Sabbath. Jesus shows us that the commandments against working on the Sabbath are in conflict with God's basic commandment to love others. The spirit of the Law has been lost by some of the Galatians, in their attempts to keep the letter of the Law – including circumcision.

Paul suggests that they sever their bondage to the Law and put on their new freedom in Christ. Like a gecko's new tail.

Returning to the gate test idea, here's an excerpt from My Dinner with Andre, a conversation between Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn.

“Where are you from?” asks Andre.

“New York City.”

“Ah, New York City, that's a very interesting place. Do you know that New Yorkers keep talking about the fact that they want to leave, but never do?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Why do you think they don't leave?”

[I give him different banal theories.]

“Oh, I don't think that's it at all. I think that New York City is the new model prison camp, where the camp is built by the inmates themselves, and the inmates are guards, and they have this pride in this thing that they've built – they've built their own prison – and so they exist in a state of schizophrenia where they are both guards and prisoners. And as a result they no longer have the capacity to leave the prison they've made or even see it as a prison.”

[He holds up a seed for a tree.] “This is a pine tree.” [He puts it in my hand.] “Escape

before it's too late.”

To Paul, the model prison camp is religion built around a labyrinth of laws and rules. And the citizenry – they have pride in what they have built, like the New Yorkers.

Paul gives his converts a tree as well – the cross of Christ – a means of escape from the prison of law to the freedom of God's grace.

III. The Law defined by Jesus

In v. 14 of today's reading, Paul writes, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Such a definition of the Law allows the poor a chance at fulfilling the requirements. In Jesus' day, only the rich have the means to fulfill the many requirements of the Law. As we mentioned last week, the Law is not only the 10 commandments; there are 613 commandments in Jewish law. The poor simply do not have the time or the money to do what is required.

In one sense, none of us is justified by the law, but only through faith in Christ. Paradoxically, as we become followers of Christ, and allow his Spirit to take up residence in our hearts, we begin to live by the spirit of the Law, rather than the letter of the Law. We begin to have more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In v. 15, Paul writes, “...if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.”

This is what life in the Law without the Spirit looks like. We nip and snarl at each other. Although we seek to follow God, of our own power we end up in self-indulgence. Paul writes a list of the ugliness we perpetrate on each other: “...fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness,

carousing, and the like.” “And the like!” – which is to say, he could go on and on! The list is endless -- the horrible things we humans do to each other. We are capable of much more mischief than Paul has time to delineate here!

At the same time, many have left the Christian faith because of the new rules we make up to replace the Law of the Old Testament.

I remember my church youth group when I was a teenager. I remember the horror with which the older folks greeted our plans to have a dance! in the church basement! Many people from strict Christian backgrounds grew up with prohibitions against – of course! – sex, smoking and alcohol.

But what about the longer list of “no’s?” “No” to: dancing, bowling, cards, dice, shorts (for boys), pants (for girls), movies, secular music, rock n’ roll...

“For freedom Christ has set us free!” But we prefer our laws and rules and prohibitions. We prefer outside controls for ourselves. And we definitely feel safer under the illusion that we can control others.

Those of us who have lived a few years, or a few decades, know that the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit is a long, hard road. The workings of evil are subtle; we are easily tricked. We easily run wild or, in horrified reaction, run back in fear to the comforting familiarity and security of the Law.

Our best intentions are not enough to bring about real change.

This is why the Christian life requires community. We encourage one another to live by the Spirit. We love each other when we fail. We repent, confess, forgive, get up and try again. And always we remember that it is not by our own strength that we live in the light. It is by the power of the One who brings us light, the One who is the light in the darkness. If his Spirit lives

in us, he will empower us to do what we are powerless to accomplish on our own.

The fruits of our lives, whatever good fruits there may be, are the fruits of His Spirit.

Closing

In a Japanese concentration camp in the Pacific during WWII, the guards learned that the American army was fast approaching. So they unlocked the gates and fled into the woods.

The prisoners, unaware of this, stayed in their compounds.

When the Army arrived, they announced, simply, "You are already free."

Paul says the same thing to the Galatians...to us: You are already free. "For freedom Christ has set us free."

Use your freedom well. As Paul reminds us, the Christian expression of freedom is to love your neighbor as yourself. Christ died that we might have this freedom. May you claim it and live it. May you live in the fullness of true freedom in Christ.

Amen.