

Sermon June 30, 2013 “Costly Freedom” Galatians 5:1, 13-25 Luke 9:57-62
(*Children’s Time - God first, others second, “I’m third!”*)

To the Galatian Christians, Paul spoke of the difference between life lived in the flesh and life lived in the Holy Spirit. He encouraged folks to live in the freedom Christ offers us. In their book, *Outflow*, contemporary writers Dave Ping and Steve Sjogren talk about “the Thief,” which they describe as “a supernatural thief doing everything he can think of to steal, kill, and utterly destroy the flow of blessings God intends for your life.” (P. 36. *Outflow*) Listen to their words:

“*You know this thief.* He’s been with you since the earliest days of your childhood, stealing words of encouragement from your heart and leaving blame, condemnation, and suspicion in their place. This Thief’s snaky voice has always been in the background, whispering: *You don’t belong...If you were more like your brother, you’d be successful...That co-worker is out to get you...Nobody appreciates you...* This thief is subtle, devious, and brutal in his never-ending quest to rob you of every drop of whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy in your life. (Philippians 4:8) (p. 36, *Outflow*, edited by fte) This “Thief” would bind us and rob us of joy, making us slaves of our angers and resentments and envy. (Pause)

Paul would challenge us all: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

It’s so easy to get trapped in negatives and hostilities! There is an old story that illustrates this. A farmer had a watermelon patch, a productive one, but neighborhood kids kept stealing some of his produce. In an effort to stop the pilfering, the farmer set up a sign at the watermelon patch with the following message: “ONE OF THESE WATERMELONS IS POISONED. GUESS WHICH ONE!!?” The next day the farmer found a new sign installed right next to his: “There’s *your* poisoned watermelon, and there’s *ours*. Now YOU guess which one!” (Various versions of this story are found on the Internet; original source uncertain)

The escalation of anger and retaliation is nothing new to us. Unfortunately, anger and retaliation permeate our world, here in Connecticut and all around the globe. Followers of Jesus, though, are challenged to not get entangled in this, but to live differently.

Paul challenged Christians: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1) The freedom God offers is not like the freedom our nation will celebrate this week; it is a deeper freedom, where we commit ourselves to find our freedom through trusting God.

A woman once told her Methodist pastor that she had grown up in a narrow, fundamentalist church. She said, “It was a church that had a rule for everything, usually a rule AGAINST everything. We had rules against dancing, against playing cards, against mowing the grass on Sundays. That’s why I like this church. Here we are free to believe anything we want, and our behavior is our own business, not anybody else’s.”

The pastor was troubled by her statement, for he wondered, "Is THAT the freedom for which Jesus Christ has set us free, to believe whatever we want and to behave however we please?" ... The letter of Paul we heard today and the gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching would say ABSOLUTELY NOT.

Consider the freedom we have been given through Jesus Christ. We have been freed from having to try to earn our way to salvation. Jesus has done that for us, and we have learned that we could never have earned it anyway. By God's mercy, we are saved. We're free because God loves us. But this does not mean that we are off the hook! We don't HAVE to do "x, y, and z" to get into heaven. BUT, because we have been given the free gift of God's love, we have before us a choice, every day: to love others or not, to get back at others or not, to forgive others or not, to serve God or not. We have a whole lot of freedom. We make our own to-do lists. Our choices determine what we do with our freedom, and our choices determine whether or not we follow Jesus.

We are free to take Jesus' command to love others and to love God seriously or not. We are free to use who we are and what we've been given as light for the world, or not. We are free to live according to the flesh (serving our own whims and desires), or to live according to God's Holy Spirit working in and through our lives. It's our choice, and every day it makes a difference in this world. Every second, every breath we take, it makes a difference to God.

The teenager and father gave each other scathing glares. It seemed that once again, nobody was going to win this argument. The two simply could not come to an agreement about anything. It wasn't because the father did not love the teen. The father wanted the best for the teen, for life. But the teen wanted freedom, the teen wanted to do what the teen wanted... Tonight's issue was tongue-piercing. This morning it had been getting out of bed before noon to look for a summer job. There were lots of other battles: whether the teen should have to come in before one o'clock in the morning... whether it was all right for the teen to date someone seven years older... whether finishing high school really was important... whether that little amount of drug paraphernalia in the teen's coat was significant, whether it mattered that the teen had come home with pockets of unexplained money...

From the teen's point of view, the Dad was being nosy and trying to interfere. From the father's point of view, there seemed danger present in every decision, danger that could threaten the very life of his teenager. The teenager decided to run away, to find freedom from all the hassles of the father. The father was devastated, and angry, and afraid for his child. He had no power to force his teen to make good choices.

If you are a parent, you may understand some of what that father endured. If you were ever a son or daughter, you may remember a time when you thought you knew more than your parent, when NOBODY was going to tell you what to do...

It's not so different with us and God. God has told us what is important in life, and yet we plunge through our lives as though our ears have been plugged. We're like recalcitrant and rebellious

children. Deep inside, we're not so sure that our Heavenly Father really knows what is best for us... And we're not sure we are willing to give up the control we have over our lives.

Even regular church-going Christians and pastors often seem not to have heard what God has told us. Or if we have heard, we've decided that we know well enough what we need and want out of life. "It's MY life, and I'll do with it what I want. If I need God, I'll choose how and when."

Is this what Jesus had in mind? Hardly.

"Follow Jesus?" a man exclaimed. "That's a no-brainer!! Of course I'd choose to follow Jesus! I want to have a decent life. I like to think of myself as a good guy, a 'white-hat' sort of person. I like being a good Christian, a decent neighbor. There's nothing really hard about it, being Christian...it's just common sense."

Anybody who says that has not read the Bible. If you think that answering the call to follow Jesus is an easy choice, consider the would-be followers from today's gospel who faced the same choice:

On the road a man asked Jesus if he could go along. "I'll go with you, wherever," he told Jesus. Jesus was curt: "Are you ready to rough it? We're not staying in the best inns, you know."

Jesus said to another, "Follow me." The man replied, "Absolutely, I will, but first give me a couple of days. I have to make arrangements for my father's funeral." Jesus refused. "First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God's kingdom!" Jesus did not offer one smidgen of sympathy or understanding to this one who might have been faithful.

Then another said, "I'm ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home." Jesus said, "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off until tomorrow. Seize this day."

So Jesus drew a hard line and told folks that what he was inviting them to do would take everything away from them. No salesmanship here, and no smooth or enticing words of a politician. If you come with me, declared Jesus, there will be no home, no security, only a life on the move, dislocated. (Based on Luke 9:57-62) (this re-telling probably originally from W. Willimon)

We tend to tell people that being Christian is easy. But Jesus said it would be hard. It *is* hard, especially for those of us who are basically comfortable with life as it is. If I am faithful as a pastor, I must tell you and myself that God wants to be taken seriously. God wants us to study the Bible, God wants us to learn about and know Jesus, and God wants us to realize that our life does not belong to US, but to God. This means that we must seek to turn ourselves away from choosing the works of the flesh and instead turn ourselves to the fruits of the Spirit of God: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, generosity, faithfulness, self-control. Every time I read these fruits I am forced to realize how far off the Lord's path I step.

There is no hard sell in Jesus. There are no empty promises of comfort or success. Jesus offers

us costly freedom, freedom that can be found *only* when we give up our hold on our lives and dare to trust God. It can be so hard to trust that God really does know and want what is best for us.

I share an old story: Long ago, in a remote Swiss village, there stood a beautiful church. It was so splendid, in fact, that it was known as the Mountain Valley Cathedral. The Cathedral was not only beautiful to look at, with its high pillars and magnificent stained glass windows, but was remarkable to hear. You see, this church had an exquisite pipe organ, the best in the entire region. People would come from miles away - even from far-off lands - to hear the lovely tones of this organ.

But one day something went wrong with the organ. Musicians and experts from around the world tried to repair it. Every time a new person would try to fix it, the villagers were subjected to dreadful sounds of disharmony. In fact, incredibly horrible, penetrating sounds polluted the air.

Time passed. No one had been able to fix the organ. It was useless. Then one day an old man appeared at the church door. He spoke with the sexton and after a time the sexton reluctantly agreed to let the old man try his hand at repairing the instrument. For two days the old man worked in almost total silence. The sexton was, in fact, getting a bit nervous. Finally on the third day - at high noon - the mountain valley was suddenly filled with intensely glorious music. Farmers dropped their plows, merchants closed their stores, everyone in town headed for the church. Even the bushes and trees of the mountain tops seemed to respond as the incredible sounds echoed from ridge to ridge.

After the old man had finished his playing, a brave soul asked him how he had been able to fix the organ, how he could have restored music and harmony when even the world's experts could not. The old man was silent for a moment, then replied, "It was an 'inside job.' You see, I was the one who built this organ 50 years ago. I positioned every pipe, set every stop, installed each key. I created it - and now I have restored it." (Several sources; original unknown)

God made us, God loves us, God understands the best and worst sounds that come from our hearts and through our lives. God alone can restore us.

Learn from Jesus, let the Holy Spirit guide, teach, and restore us. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

May our ears, minds and hearts perceive how the Lord is asking us to follow him right now. Not next week, not when things in our lives are in order - NOW. He knows the things that would pull us off his path; he understands the pressures we are under and the desires we may have. But he also knows what is absolutely best for each of us, the freedom that we can experience only when we totally commit ourselves to trusting God. May we recognize his call - his challenge - as the true freedom available to us through the love and grace of God. By this will we will live: with God FIRST, others second, ourselves third; this is freedom in Christ Jesus. May it be so for each of us. Amen.