

*The Freedom to Love*

Shepherd's Grace Church

June 30, 2013

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. <sup>2</sup>Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. <sup>3</sup>Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. <sup>4</sup>You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup>For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. <sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. <sup>7</sup>You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup>Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. <sup>9</sup>A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. <sup>10</sup>I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. <sup>11</sup>But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. <sup>12</sup>I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

<sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>15</sup>If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. <sup>16</sup>Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup>By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup>And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup>If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (Galatians 5: 1-25)

This is the third in a series of four sermons on freedom. The message for all four comes from Paul's letter to the Galatians. The Galatians are a group of people who most likely migrated from the north as Celtic people to a region between modern day Syria and Turkey. They would have most likely looked different to Paul than many in the region. Their skin would have been lighter in color. Their nature as gentile would have been more Roman than Greek. The gods they had believed in in the past would have been Roman gods. Their inclination to faith in one god would have been very new.

Freedom to them was never conceived as an absence of authority or power over their lives. They were willing subjects of the Roman Empire. Freedom was instead expressed within community. Together they were seeking the freedom to be perceived as people who demonstrated a love for the God who had been introduced to them.

In their previous faith they would have built altars to the gods of their culture. They would have built shrines and made sacrifice appropriately. They would have rejoiced in the perception that their gods had shown favor to them and they would have been devastated at the thought that their gods had deserted them. Faith for the Galatians would have been a capricious and somewhat whimsical notion. They would have known the reality that their gods could choose to support them or not.

The notion then that God was consistent, steadfast and always caring was a new one for them. As they grew in that notion, they wanted a way to express their growing willingness to serve such a God. Consistent with their past expressions of service to gods, they wanted an outward and visible sign of their inward devotion to God. As apostles of the new faith in the Way came through their community they suggested such a sign. The sign, the ultimate sign they suggested was circumcision. They argued that in circumcision they could have the altar to worship at. Circumcision could replace the shrines and temples they had come to be so comfortable with. Circumcision, they argued would be the focus of their faith!

The Galatian faithful had been initially introduced to Jesus by Paul on one of his missionary journeys through the region. In his introduction, Paul invited the Galatians to experience freedom. That freedom meant the leaving behind of their previous yolk of bondage to different shrines and altars. It meant the giving up of things for an acceptance of God's work in the Holy Spirit. The problem was that there was no outward and visible sign. There was only an inward and Spiritual Grace! When other apostles came through they tried to offer the outward sign as a way of giving confidence to the new faithful.

Paul's problem; that the sign become the object of worship and reverence was a great source of conflict in the community. Paul's argument; that people who choose to be circumcised were not free to pick and choose which parts of Jewish faith they could adopt, had once again made them in fact slaves. Freedom allows people to be unencumbered in faith! Freedom allows for a person to choose to be in a relationship with a living God who creates in freedom and invites His created to choose God but always allows the option to choose otherwise! Freedom in God is a willingness to allow God to live in you and not a requirement by God that you worship according to a specific ritual.

In the first week of our examination of freedom we thought about the freedom to Imagine. We looked at Galatians 2: 20 and recognized freedom to die to our old self and invite Christ to live in us. We no longer live but it is Him living in us. In His life in us, we can then live as He invites us to. We can live a life of service and of love! WE are free to choose this life as we "take up the cross and follow Him."

(Luke 9) Crucifixion in this sense is an expression of the love we have for others. It is not a requirement for salvation but is rather an expression of the freedom we experience in salvation that we cannot help ourselves. We are compelled to love because of His great love for us! WE are free to imagine our lives lived out in this great love.

Last week we looked at our differences as individuals. We discovered that God created us with these differences. We were created in God's image and likeness so we could have freedom in God, but we were also created male and female so that in our differences we could come together not only in community where everyone was welcome but in communion where we share our lives with each other!

In communion, we are free to recognize that while we all live in difference with one another, our differences become our strength as we offer the gifts God has given for the greater good of the union. We are therefore "No longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" but we are one in Christ Jesus. WE therefore have the freedom to be. We can live our lives in the present, knowing that our future is assured and that our past is forgiven! We can choose to see each other as legitimate and free people; each of us possessing incredible worth as individuals.

The Galatians struggled with that. Some of them wanted to be the same. They wanted an identifying mark that would allow them to be recognized. Paul cringed at the thought! He desperately needed to communicate to them that the acceptance of such a mark was in fact an acceptance to the slavery they had broken away from. If they choose the sign, they chose the whole law. They acknowledged that their ability to be faithful to the law was their way to salvation. Paul knew that they could never achieve salvation through the law! Instead he invited them to recognize their salvation as a gift of love.

Today we talk about the freedom to love! In just a few weeks the youth group will travel to a place very different from the one they have grown up in. As they travel to Espanola, New Mexico they will experience sights and sounds and smells very different from the ones they are accustomed to. They will groan and they will complain and they will ultimately fall in love with the people they meet there. They will become enamored of the visual stimulation there. They will acquire taste for different foods there. They will come back changed!

They will be changed not only in their physical perceptions of the world but also in their spiritual perceptions. They will walk through Bandolier national monument and experience the past lives of a people still struggling to survive in today's world. They will recognize the incredible contributions of a culture which time has seemingly passed by and they will be moved.

In addition they will go to a place called the church of the holy dirt. There they will hear from the priest of the miracles that have occurred there. They will walk down a narrow set of stairs to a place where

they will see evidence of those miracles. They will bring back vials of the dirt and they will look for miracles in their lives. One of the miracles we hope they will find is the miracle of love.

In addition to the great healing that has taken place at the church of the holy dirt, one of the things the priest will tell them is of the great prayer that has taken place there! He will explain to them that it is not the dirt that creates the miracle in this place but rather the faithful interaction of the people with a God who loves them and their willingness to accept that love and communicate with God through prayer. The priest will tell them that it is this power that causes great events to happen in this place and he will offer to them an invitation to let this same kind of miracle work in their lives not only in Espanola, but also in everywhere they go! The freedom to Love comes, not from what we do or think or say, but from the willingness we have to receive God's grace and recognize it as an incomprehensible gift given beyond anything we might ever imagine; given in spite of our sinful nature by a God who wants to reconcile us with Himself!

Our youth will hear this invitation from the priest and then they will walk around the grounds of the church. They will see evidence of the miracles that have taken place there. They will experience the presence of the crutches and the walkers and the wheelchairs that have been left behind by countless numbers who have been willing to receive the Grace of God and bear witness in their lives to His willingness to reach out to those who will not question but rather receive. In their experience they will begin to recognize the freedom to love. They will understand even as you understand this morning that the freedom to love comes not from our own willingness to express offers or promises to others but rather to recognize that before anything else; before the world was created, before God spoke light and life into it, before the plants and animals, before he looked around and said, "It is Good," God loved and continues to love us! Paul said in Galatians 2, "Love is this, not that we have loved God, but that God loves us enough to give His only begotten Son as an atonement for our sin." God makes this offer not because He has to, but because He has the freedom to be, the freedom to choose, and the freedom to act in that choice. This is the *Freedom to Love!* What God wants us to know today is that we also have that same freedom!

Love is not an obligation lived out in a series of gives and takes among people. The clearest example of this is the love that truly exists in a marriage. As I tell every couple who comes to me to seek the estate of Christian marriage, "Marriage is not a matter of a license and a ring. Marriage is not a contract that exists because documents are on file with the state. Marriage is instead a covenant." Marriage is a bond that is created between husband and wife through a mutual and binding lifestyle that invites them into a communion. As we talked last week, community is where differences are discovered. Communion is where differences are recognized, embraced and rejoiced in for the strengthening that they bring!

In marriage, a couple does not simply agree on paper to share assets. They agree in heart to live into the strengths that each brings to the relationship. If they have a truly successful marriage, they

recognize God's gifts and strengths as a part of that relationship as well. Covenant is not of this world. It is the joining together that allows for difficulties and exceptions and embraces them as a way to grow stronger. Contracts exist to be broken in times of exception. If you fail to make a payment to the bank they break the contract. If you fail to pay your credit card bill the company cancels your privilege. These are examples of contracts. In covenant these examples become a way of growing closer and relying more completely on the other. They exist not because of a piece of paper or a ring, but because of a freedom. This freedom to love ignites a deeper willingness to grow closer together and to take greater risks for the sake of the relationship. God took these risks when He sent His only Son to live with us and be in relationship with us. He risked everything in the death of Christ on the cross. He risked because God has a covenant relationship with us. He did not have to risk, but because of the great love He has, he made the choice!

In Paul's message to us today, he reminds us that in risk there is no need for an outward and visible sign. The freedom to love exists not because of the rings that a couple wear or because of the paper they have signed but because of the bond they have created by joining together. The bond cannot be seen, but neither can it be broken. The Galatians wanted a wedding ring in their new relationship with God. They had always had that relationship in the past. They had altars and sacrifice. They had seasons of the year and many other visible signs of God's promise. They wanted the same from the new relationship they had with the true God of creation. The Jewish apostles who came after Paul offered such a sign.

The apostles offered circumcision as an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual connection. This sign was to be the salvation of the gentiles. All they had to do was accept the sign and their salvation was assured! What could possibly be the problem with this? How could this act lead to anything but a greater recognition of God in their lives. The sign would be a constant reminder of their faithfulness. The sign would be a continual exclamation of their love of the One True God! What could be the problem?

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we think this way as well don't we? We tell people who what to come to church that they must believe exactly the same way we do. They have to have worked out their salvation through prayer and the singing of hymns and the reading of the right scriptures. I heard a pastor not long ago who said that he read from the only authorized word of God, the *King James Bible*. His inference here is that if you or I read from another translation of the Bible we do not receive the same God Breathed scriptural sanctity as he does. What is the problem? I attended worship not long ago at a church where you were made to feel uncomfortable if you did not raise your hands in singing and prayer. What is the problem. I have been reading many Christian pastors who say that if you practice the sin of homosexuality you can not be a Christian. Others say that if you agree that all people have a right to enter your country you cannot be a Christian because you are taking away from those who are trying to make a living and are already in the country. What could be the problem?

In Nazi Germany in the 1930's the Germans made the Jews wear a yellow "Star of David" on their arm. No one objected to this action. It was impossible to tell a Jew from anyone else unless there was some outward sign. What could be the problem? The problem with this example and all the others listed above is that they define people as different not based on their freedom to be different but on the prejudices of society. As human beings we should not have to read a bible that was authorized not by God but by the King of England for publication. WE should not have to raise our hands to pray. We should not have to have the same position regarding immigration and we should not have to wear signs identifying our religion. We should be and we are free to love God not in the way we dress or in the church we attend but in the heart which God has opened for us through the power of the Holy Spirit!

Paul's message to the Galatians and to us today is that we are not to judge others by how they choose to worship but that we are to love others for the heart they bring to worship. Yet there is still more! Even as we do not judge others we are not to become wrapped up in our own efforts to signify our faith through outward symbols either. The fasting we do, or the tithing we offer are not to be outward symbols for others to see. They are to be an expression of the love we have for God. WE are free to express this love not because we have a contract with God for our gifts but because we willingly choose to offer what we have to the One who willingly offers everything He has for us! Our freedom exists in covenant and not in contract! Our freedom to love exists in the Love of God from which it originates!

Paul is concerned that the Galatians understand this. Being circumcised seems like such a magnificent gesture. Abram, Isaac and Jacob all made this gesture. They all willingly offered themselves to God in this way but Paul reminds us and the first century Christians that faith came before the expression of faith. Abraham's faith in God was expressed before the sign was given. We are heirs in love then not to the obligation of an outward action but to a promise made by God to all of us, a promise of His unyielding love for us! It is this love which invites us into a relationship and not the symbols of the love. WE are heirs to the promise! In the promise we have the freedom!

One of the stories the kids might hear at Espanola is the story of the "Penetente" These are men who want to demonstrate their faith in God by running on Good Friday from the town to the church, a distance of about 9 miles. While running, they flagellate themselves with a leather thong causing stripes or welts on their backs and bleeding intended to replicate the bleeding of Jesus before crucifixion. On the surface this seems like a magnanimous gesture however as we look at it we must ask, "does that mean that the bleeding of Christ on the cross was insufficient?"

Paul's lesson for us today calls us to exactly that question. Do we want to be justified by our actions in the law? Do we want to claim our salvation by the way we pray or the way we sing or the way we hold others accountable to their faith? Do we want to claim our salvation by judging the sexual or social or religious sins of others? Salvation by the law requires that we do exactly this. Paul's point in lifting it us

is that in order to judge we are obliged to obey the whole of the law! We are not worthy of judging if we are not worthy of judgment!

While we may be able to stand to the judgment of one point of the law, none is worthy of being able to stand to the whole of the law. All of us are sinners and all have fallen short of the Glory of God! Circumcision then, or any other outward requirement of faith is nothing more than a bond of slavery requiring us to live lives of absolute obedience to law and not to love. There can be no grace in law. The law is rigid and absolute. It is a contract and when violated all the privileges associated with it are null and void! If we choose one tenant of the law to hold ourselves to, we must choose the whole of the law! We cannot have an outward and visible sign that holds us. Our faith must hold us!

We are justified by our faith and that faith then produces the signs others can see. Faith produces in us the presence of the Holy Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit puts aside the forces of law. The Spirit Justifies us by the work of God in us producing love, joy, peace patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control. We no longer live as slaves to an obligation but we live as examples of the Crucified Christ! We have been crucified with him and now we are free to let Him live in us so it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us.

*This is The Freedom of Love!*

*Amen*