

## **5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost July 5, 2020**

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-13: Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

#### **A reflection on freedom-**

Freedom/Liberty- on the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend we spend a lot of time celebrating those ideals.

But what do they really mean? Both for us as citizens of the Kingdom of God- as Christians and as citizens of the United States.

First, some context for the Corinthians text- Re-founded as a colony of Rome- Corinth was one of the largest cities in Greece and a bustling town filled with commerce and people of all nations. This meant that there were also a lot of temples to the gods that these people worshipped. A key component of that worship was sacrifice of animals.

Some of the meat was consumed during the sacrifice. Some would have been kept by the priests. The rest was sold in the marketplace or used for a variety of feasts to celebrate holy days of the gods. Sometimes those feasts were public, other times private.

The concern in our text is the eating of meat sacrificed to these other gods. Now, Paul is addressing those who believe they possess the knowledge that there is only one God and these pagan gods are lifeless statues. So, they need not fear the source of the meat. Rather- they can go in the pagan temple and eat whatever is offered. In fact, going to those temple feasts may be a way to show their spiritual maturity and freedom. See how free I am! In a sense, it is a kind of boasting.

Not only that, but from the context of the letter, it sounds like these people may have been encouraging their “weaker” brothers and sisters to attend these feasts at the temple as a way to build up their faith.

Paul’s response to these “knowledgeable” folks is- you are right about how lifeless and powerless these gods are, but not everyone has this knowledge. So, for the sake of those who might not be too far removed from worshipping these gods- refrain from eating that meat if it is going to put their faith at risk. Make sure that this “liberty” you have does not become a stumbling block a means of harm for another. If it is- don’t do it for their sake. Christian freedom is not license. It lies also in refraining from exercising that liberty for the sake of others.

First and foremost, freedom for Paul is what Christ has done for us- set us free and given us the rights of citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. What this means in practice Paul spells out very clearly in Galatians 5:13- “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.” Christian freedom is not a license for self-indulgence, but a gift which allows us to become servants to our neighbors.

Martin Luther reflects this understanding in his seminal work *The Freedom of a Christian*. The main thesis of his work is that a Christian person is a free lord over all things and subject to none. And. A Christian person is a dutiful servant of all things and subject to everyone.

What, then, does this mean?

Lutheran theologian Gerhard Eberling restates Luther's thesis this way, "because I am free lord of all I made myself a slave to all". Christian freedom is not constricted and diminished through serving others but rather fulfills itself through serving others. Freedom lies in working for the good of another human being- not in pursuing my own good.

Catholic theologian Avery Dulles, SJ – Pope John Paul II treatise *Truth about Freedom*- At the lower level, that of nature, freedom means the absence of physical constraint. A balloon rises freely when nothing obstructs it; a stone falls freely when nothing impedes it. A dog is free if it is let off the leash so that it can follow its impulses. To be free, in this lower, natural sense, is to act according to an inner inclination.

At the higher level, distinctive to people- those created in the image of God, John Paul II believes that if my motives could never transcend my individual self-interest or the collective self-interest of my group, I could never be truly free because we could always be manipulated and compelled to act in specific ways by fear of punishment or hope of reward. Because it moves us into that lower realm of animals who can be drawn by dangling a carrot or banana in front of their noses, or by the stick in your hand.

So, he believes possess freedom only when we go beyond individual and collective selfishness and reach out to that which reason perceives as objectively good and true. Our freedom is not diminished but expanded and fulfilled when we employ it to bring about a true good.

English Catholic historian Lord Acton put it this way, freedom is "not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought' The truly free person is one who does what is good out of love for goodness itself.

So, as a citizen of the Kingdom of God- our freedom lies in serving others. Our freedom is not something to be exercised if it will cause grievous harm to my neighbor.

The understanding of freedom/liberty in the United States is one that has moved over time. That is the thesis of Professor Eric Foner. He makes a compelling case for this moving definition of freedom from the beginning of the Republic.

Liberty/Freedom of people was core for the founders- yet, they did not recognize that freedom in everyone (women, slaves, in some places non-property owners). Liberty for them was the freedom to govern themselves- but this was primarily a collective sense of freedom. There were still rules and laws that governed- limited- behavior of individuals because it was understood that the good of the many could infringe the activity of the individual for the sake of everyone's freedom.

In the 1930's and 40's freedom became associated with Civil Rights (free speech, free press, freedom of religion). This was a counter narrative to the Fascist dictatorships on the rise in Europe.

Post WWII the slogan for the rebuilding effort led by the US was "prosperity makes you free". Freedom was economic and based on consumerism.

Since the 1990's the language of freedom in the United States has been couched in more libertarian and conservative terms. Foner comments on how the

dominant constellation of definitions he found from that time on were a series of negations – Freedom was freedom from- government, from social responsibility, from a common public culture, from restraints on individual self-definition and consumer choice.

Freedom/liberty is now mostly conceived in the United States in individualistic terms. “My freedom”. We may fight for liberty together but that means my right to do what I want.

To sum up Foner’s argument in my own words, over the last 244 years we have moved from the freedom to govern ourselves to freedom from government.

Friends in Christ. We are citizens of two kingdoms- first- by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and through our baptism we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Our first loyalty lies there. I would say every Christian would affirm this.

Second, we are citizens of the United States. And thankful to be so. For we enjoy many benefits and privileges as citizens of this nation- afforded to us through the sacrifice of those who have served in government, in our military, as the statesmen and women who have formed our nation and our world.

But let us never forget that our primary identity is that of follower of Jesus. And that our freedom lies not in doing what we want. But in serving our neighbor. And that sometimes, that means refraining from doing something that will cause them harm- to their body, mind, or spirit.

For example, in this time of pandemic and the rise of cases once again in our nation, our state, and our county. There are simple things that we can do that will

help curb the spread of this virus. Wash our hands, keep our distance, wear a mask.

While I am convinced by the overwhelming preponderance of evidence that the more people who wear a mask in public the less chance there is for the virus to spread in those interactions, even if you don't think that is so. I would argue that if your not wearing a mask causes harm to another- even mentally- your Christian freedom lies in wearing one for the sake of their mental health.

I would also argue that we wear a mask for the sake of those who truly cannot. Who have medical conditions that make it dangerous not just inconvenient or hard.

On this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend- I would invite us all to ponder what freedom- liberty means to us and to consider whether that definition might need some renovation.

Jesus Christ died for you- so that you might be free. Jesus Christ died for me- so that I might be free. Let us consider whether our exercise of that freedom honors the model Christ has set for us.

On this weekend we give thanks to God for our nation and our citizenship in it. We pray for our leaders and for our fellow citizens- that our union with one another would grow stronger. For as Lincoln said- quoting Jesus I might add- A house divided against itself cannot stand.

On this weekend, let us also give thanks to God for our citizenship in God's kingdom. And let us live out this week our Christian freedom that is truly found in service to our neighbor.