



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Free to Love
Galatians 5:1-6, 13-14

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Fred Craddock told the story that early one morning a Native American boy was awakened by his father. On his way to work he dropped his son off at the home of an old Native American woman. He did this every day for a month. During that month the old woman told the little boy all the stories of the Kiowa tribe. She told of the wandering on the prairies, the buffalo hunts, stories of great warriors and the cold winters; stories of the white man coming and the braves who fought to defend their tribal lands. She told him stories about the hawk and the eagle and the bear and the lizard. She told stories of the mountains, rivers and forest. All day long for a month the stories went on.

After work on the final day of that month, the father picked his son up. A month earlier he had taken a boy to learn from an old woman, but when he picked up his child on the final day, he was no longer just a boy; he was a Kiowa Indian boy. It was in learning the stories of his tribe that he became a

Kiowa. You see, a person who does not know the history, the story of his nation, is an illegitimate child of that nation.

We will be celebrating the birth of our nation this week, and I hope that every child and adult who is a citizen of this great nation will know our history and better understand who we are.

Our children should know about our foreparents who immigrated here from Europe and Asia looking for treasure or a better life. Some found it and some did not. Our children should know about our foreparents who were captured in Africa and unwillingly brought here on slave ships. Our children should know about the hardships our people faced during the time when we were subjects to the English crown. They should know about the Second Continental Congress and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. They and we should know about the hardships that faced the Continental Army as they fought bravely under General George Washington. They should remember Lexington, Concord, the military defeats, Valley Forge and finally Washington's victory over Cornwallis's army at Yorktown.

We should all know about the bravery and the wonder of creating a nation where all people are understood as being created equal. We should all know how our nation has not backed down from tyrants like Adolf Hitler and fought to give the rights of freedom to not only our citizens but for people all over the world. We should remember the great sacrifices made by our fathers and mothers who lived during that war.

And we should admit our wrongs and learn from them. As you know, when our nation's constitution was written, it made provision for slavery. And that ungodly mistake led to a Civil War and we are still suffering the effects 229 years after our Constitution was established. We must always remember the number of treaties our government broke with Native Americans, and how our drive toward Manifest Destiny almost eliminated Native Americans all together. The victory over Germany and Japan was glorious, but during that war our nation imprisoned our own citizens of Japanese descent in internment camps. We have put tyrants in power in other nations, only to have them turn against us and we wonder why.

Our nation's history is filled with righteousness, glory and wonder, and it is filled with tyranny, shame and human sin. Yes, to be a citizen of this nation and to work toward achieving our goals as a people, we have to know

who we are, and that is done by knowing our history, both the good and bad of it.

Who are we? Or a better question is who are we to be? What are we to strive toward? For me that is easy. We are a people who love liberty and are willing to fight for the liberty of others. It is self-evident. "All people, not just our citizens, but all people are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." I think Jefferson was brilliant in his understanding that he could not list all our unalienable rights, but simply stopped at three examples: life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

We have never lived up to the ideals our country was founded upon. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us of this fact when he said, "It is time we stopped our blithe lip service to the guarantees of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These fine statements are embodied in the Declaration of Independence, but that document was always a declaration of intent rather than of reality. There were slaves when it was written; there were still slaves when it was adopted; and to this day . . . millions of poor Americans are in economic bondage that is scarcely less oppressive."

Dr. King convincingly pointed out that the goals of the Declaration of Independence are ideals to work toward, and as a free American it is my obligation to work, to sacrifice in order to make the ideals upon which our nation was founded more of a reality. This is the responsibility of every American to work to promote the goals of our nation. In a sinful world we will never arrive, but at least this is our job. It is an unfathomable goal, but a noble goal. The problem is what the Bible points out; we are a sinful species, where people tend to be more interested in working for the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness for themselves, rather than seeking these goals for all people. The reason is to achieve our nation's goals for all people will take sacrifice, which to many in our world is a foreign word.

It is an irony, but it is true that no one can be free without sacrifice. It is ironic but true that the more we sacrifice the freer we will be, and the less we sacrifice for the sake of others the more bound we will be.

This is true of our American citizenship and our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

In our text this morning, Paul summed up the sacrifice to be offered by God's people and that is to love. Remember again Paul's words:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. . . .

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

I guess what I am trying to say is that no one can be free without love, and the more we love the freer we are. To love is our responsibility. So please do not use your freedom as an American to simply enjoy all that this nation has to give, but we have to give of ourselves in return. And Paul is saying, please do not use your freedom in Christ to indulge your sinful appetite, but bind yourself to others in love.

The classic question that dates all the way back to Paul's day is, if we are loved by God and forgiven in Christ then why not take advantage of the situation and indulge our appetites? Or as Americans, if we are free then the rest of the world can go to wherever, but I have rights that I will not give up.

I remember being called upon to teach the senior high Sunday school class while serving a church in Abilene, Texas. It was a great class, but often it was the case that the students were more interested in stumping the teacher rather than sticking to the lesson. I forgot what we were talking about, but one of the girls in the class asked a question about Christian freedom. She said, "If we are free from sin, that is if Christ has forgiven us, that he has paid the price for all our sin (past, present and future), and there is nothing I can do to make Jesus stop loving me, then why can't I go out and enjoy my sinning? It will be forgiven. I'm saved, so why worry?"

How do you answer that question? What can you say? I asked everyone in this high school class to think about the person they loved the most in this world. Parents, get real, these are high school kids. Grandparents, maybe. A close friend, or even a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Now think about that person and think about your relationship with that person, that person who would probably do anything for you and you would do most anything for them. Now, would you intentionally do

something that would hurt your friend or destroy your relationship with them?

“Well of course not,” the young woman said, “I love them too much to do anything to hurt them or my relationship with them.” And that is the answer to her question. We are free from sin so we can live in relationship with Jesus Christ. Or, even better, we are free from sin so we can be of service to Jesus Christ, thus showing our love for Christ.

Did you know that our Presbyterian understanding of the law is that God’s law instructs us how we can love and honor God? The law is not a set of rules that restrict us, but they help us understand what matters to God. Because of the work of Jesus Christ, we no longer keep the law in order to earn salvation. Our salvation is earned by the work of Christ, but the law is still important, for it tells us how to love God. As Jesus said, **“They who have my commandments and keep them, they are the ones who love me.”** We show our love for God by keeping the commandment to love. Once again Paul and Jesus instruct Christians that we can keep the whole law if we will love, and we cannot choose who we will love, but we simply love as Jesus did.

As our American freedom is to be loved, cherished, enjoyed, respected, and never to be taken for granted, how much more our Christian freedom? And as our American freedom calls to responsibility, how much more does the death of Jesus call for Christians to be responsible. And in case you are asking what is my Christian responsibility, the answer is simple. It is basically one word, “love.” “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” Amen.