

Our Spiritual Independence Day

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 (NRSV)

July 1, 2007

As we come together this morning today, the word that is on our mind is “freedom.” It is a word which, in our context, brings up images of Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, the Declaration of Independence, the founding of a new nation out of former British colonies, and so many others.

One of the issues with which this new country struggled was slavery. Some signers of the Declaration of Independence were slave holders and the words, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was applied unequally. Not all of the inhabitants of the new United States of America were equal in the sight of the law. Not all of us were given the full advantages of the blessings of liberty. It took almost a hundred years to blot the peculiar institution of slavery out of the nation’s practice, and yet still today we struggle with the remnants of individual and institutional racism. In many ways, we still struggle with Martin Luther King’s vision of a society in which a person is not judged by the color of his or her skin, but by the content of his or her character. We struggle, but we still push on.

I believe that all of us in this room today would agree, however, that freedom is good and slavery is bad. Freedom and the blessings of liberty are ideals for which this nation has fought and bled. Slavery is a gross injustice against which the nation engaged in a great civil war. Freedom is a blessing. Slavery is sin against God and humankind.

Today, as we approach the birthday of our nation and the celebration of liberty enshrined in documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, The Bill of Rights, and others, I wanted to spend a few minutes with the Apostle Paul who calls us back into slavery; a slavery of love to each other as a testimony to the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Strangely enough, we are to use our freedom to become slaves. This is an alternative freedom not practiced all that well. You see, freedom for Paul means becoming a slave to each other and a slave to Christ. That is a definition of freedom that we don’t understand very well. For many of us, freedom means something completely different.

I was surfing the Washington Post online the other day and found an article in the archives that was published back on September 14, 2006. The title of the articles was, “When Malls Stay Open on Sundays, the Pious Party.”

The article mentions Jonathan Gruber of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Daniel Hungerman of Notre Dame who have published a paper with the National Bureau of Economic Research titled, “The Church vs. The Mall: What Happens When Religion Faces Increased Secular Competition?”

According to these scholars, when states eliminated blue laws - those laws prohibiting the sale of non-essential goods on Sunday – church attendance declined by 5%, from 37% to 32%. At the same time, alcohol and drug use increased significantly among young adults. The really fascinating data shows that these increases were greater among churchgoers than for those who never went to worship services. The suspicion is that time spent at the mall increases one's exposure to sinners, and we Christians are not all that adept at handling temptation.

With freedom comes great responsibility. How many of us, with our newly minted driver's licenses in our pockets, discover the hard way that we don't handle our freedom very well. I remember my very first car date. It was in the fall of 1969. I had obtained my driver's license two weeks before and still had my temporary license. In those days, we had temporary licenses until they could send out the real ones in the mail.

So I was in my dad's 1963 Olds 98. Debby Gething was sitting beside me. I had the radio blaring, one arm around Debby, a coke balanced between my legs. Did you know that at that time, there was a four-way stop on the corner of St. Joe Center and Maplecrest Roads? Neither did I...until I blew through it at forty-five miles an hour, right in front of a Sheriff's Deputy. Sometimes we don't use our freedom very well.

How many college students, freshly free from their parent's supervision, use that opportunity to learn how many shots of tequila it takes to get blind, stinking drunk? It happens. Sometimes we don't use our freedom very wisely.

How many of our young people, free from the restraints of home, use that freedom to explore unbridled sexual activity, sometimes with devastating results? It happens. We don't always use our freedom in a responsible manner.

But there can be a much different result of being set free. Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." The sort of liberty to which we are set free doesn't have to result in bad behavior. You see, being set free in Christ is not to obtain liberty to go crazy. We are not given permission to do whatever the heck we want to do. Freedom in Christ is not freedom to do what we want. It is freedom to do what Jesus wants.

Paul says, "...do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." There is no get out of jail free card in life. Actions have consequences. Paul hopes we don't learn that the hard way.

In Romans 6:1, Paul is again speaking about our relationship with Christ, and the manner in which grace frees us from sin. He says, "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means."

Here is how Paul envisions the freedom given us in Christ. He says in Galatians 5:13, "...through love become slaves to one another." The challenge for us is to love one another as Christ loved us.

This study of the elimination of blue laws suggests that when stores opened on Sunday, marijuana use increased by 11% and heavy use of alcohol increased by 5% - among church goers. It has to make you wonder what other pleasure-seeking behavior is taking place among church attendees. Perhaps we are not too far from those behaviors listed by the Apostle: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing.

We have all sorts of freedoms, but they are not necessarily Christian freedoms. The Christian freedoms we have are summed up in verses 22-23. We have freedom to have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Our freedom in Christ means that we have the freedom to go out of our way to serve one another. We have the freedom to go crazy helping and loving each other.

Way back in 1990, I read a book by Tony Campolo titled, "The Kingdom of God is a Party" (Word Publishing: Dallas). In that book, he tells this wonderful story.

He was speaking at a conference in Hawaii. When he arrived there, he went to his hotel, unpacked, and went to bed. But his internal clock was still feeling the jet lag and he just couldn't sleep. So he went out and found a greasy little diner around the corner. He went in and ordered a donut and coffee. As he was eating his snack, eight or nine prostitutes walked in, finished with their work for the night.

Tony listened to their conversation. One of the women said to the other, "You know, tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39," to which her friend replied, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party?"

Campolo waited them out, and when they left, he talked to the guy behind the counter. "Do you know them?" "Yeah, they come in here every night."

"Do you know the one who is having a birthday tomorrow?" "Yeah, that's Agnes

Tony said, "Let's throw her a birthday party tomorrow night right here in the diner." They guy behind the counter liked the idea and so the plans were made.

The next night, Tony came back to the diner at about 2:30. Harry the counter guy, said he would make a cake. Tony brought the decorations. Harry had gotten the word out on the street, so that by 3:15, just about every hooker in Honolulu was in the place.

Right at 3:30, Agnes and her friends walked into the diner and everyone yelled, "Happy Birthday!" The candles were lit and blown out. By this time, Agnes is in tears as everyone is yelling, "Cut the cake."

So Agnes says, "I just live a down the street a couple of doors. Do you mind if we don't cut the cake right now. I'd like to take the cake home. I'll be right back."

So Agnes picked up the cake and walked out the door, which left everybody in sort of a stunned silence. They didn't know what to do or say.

Tony Campolo said that at this point, he got up on a chair and said, "What do you say that we pray together?" So there he was, in the middle of the night, in a greasy spoon, with half the hookers in Honolulu, praying for Agnes.

After he said "amen," Harry the counter guy said, "You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?" Tony Campolo answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry answered, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it."

As we think about our freedom today, let's remember that we are freed from the power of sin so that we can fully submit to God and to fulfill God's Will in being a slave for Christ. Christian freedom is never to be understood as freedom from responsibility toward others. In Christ, we don't have "freedom from." We instead have, "freedom to." Freedom to commit ourselves fully to each other, to become a slave for each other, to love each other as Christ loved us.

So as we approach the July 4th holiday, I hope we will enjoy the freedoms that have been given us through the blessings of citizenship in the United States. But even more, I hope we will enjoy the freedom given us through Christ, for that is the more important freedom. It is a freedom that is a radical submission - to the Will of God and to our sisters and brothers.

Martin Luther said, "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." On this independence day, I pray that we may strive to make Christian freedom the ideal for which we strive.