

Freedom Galatians 5:1, 13-25

A husband and wife were talking about their living wills. The husband was adamant about his desires. "Just so you know," he says, "I would never want to live in a vegetative state, dependent on some machine and fluids from a bottle. If I ever get to that state, I just want you to pull the plug."

His wife thought about this for a moment, got up, unplugged the TV and took the beer out of his hand.

Today I want to talk about freedom, an appropriate theme for this week as we celebrate our nation's independence. The freedom we enjoy is a precious gift

And we should never take it for granted.

In our lesson from Galatians, Paul writes, "It's for freedom that Christ has set us free." What he means is that freedom is God's will for us. Now, there are two kinds of tyranny that Paul deals with in Galatians 5.

The first is the tyranny of bad religion. Paul was at odds with the circumcision party, so-called Judaizers. Some Jews who had become Christians wanted to embrace their new faith preserving the traditions of their fathers. They wanted to hang on to the ceremonial laws and rituals that had come down from Moses.

Even more important, they wanted to force their views on all other Christians, insisting that the circumcision of all males be a requirement of the church.

Paul, on the other hand, wanted a clean break from the past. He wanted people to know that Christianity was a matter of the inner spirit, not the outer flesh. Paul knew that elevating tradition over Christian love was not what the God wanted from his people. That's a constant temptation for church people--elevating tradition over Christian love and acceptance.

At Sunday service at Saint Bartholomew's Church in New York City, just before the service started, ushers noticed a man wearing a large hat sitting in the front row. An usher moved to this man's pew, leaned in, and discreetly asked him to remove his hat. The man replied that he would not.

The head usher was then summoned. He made the same request, and received the same answer. About that time, the president of the women of the parish arrived and was asked to assist. She had the same dismal result.

Finally, with only two minutes remaining before the opening hymn, the senior warden of the parish was summoned. He tiptoed up beside the man and tried to seize the hat, but the man nimbly dodged him, and there was no time for further attempts.

As the opening hymn began and the procession entered the church the man stood, removed his hat and did not put it on again. At the conclusion of the service, the four frustrated people waited for the man at the rear of the church.

The senior warden approached him and said, "Sir, about the hat: perhaps you don't understand, but in our church men do not wear hats at worship."

The man replied, "Oh, but I do understand. I've been part of this denomination all my life. As a matter of fact, I've been coming to this church regularly for two years, and I've

never met a soul, until this morning when I met an usher, the head usher, the president of the church women, and the senior warden.”¹

The leaders of that parish were concerned about a tradition--men do not wear hats in worship. They were more concerned about keeping that tradition than they were about welcoming strangers into their church family.

Far-fetched? Think about our ministry here, and the traditions we hold on to simply because “we’ve-always-done-it-that-way”, even when new ways of doing things are better and more efficient. When tradition rules over love, that’s bad religion. When tradition becomes so engrained in a church that the practice becomes a rut, after a while that rut begins to look like a grave.

Christ wants to set us free from the tyranny of such religion.

Even worse than the tyranny of bad religion, however, is the tyranny of sin.

Paul writes, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But don’t 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.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want . . .”

You see, some of the believers had been pagans before they began to follow Jesus. They also wanted to hold on to some of their traditions, many of which included sinful habits not conducive to the lifestyle of a follower of Christ. Paul rightly saw that there is no slavery more odious than the slavery of sin.

Ask someone who’s addicted to drugs or to any destructive habit. Many of them will go to desperate measures for a fix. “The monkey on my back,” is what heroin addicts call their addiction, a habit which grows to the point that it nearly squeezes the life out of them. Christ wants us to be free!

At LSA Anaconda, Balad, Iraq I was summoned to the field hospital because a convoy in one of our subordinate units had been attacked. I stood by the stretcher of a young man whose life teetered precariously between life and death. I tried to console him best I could at 2:30 in the morning with doctors and nurses frantically working to plug his wounds. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him.

“No,” he answered, and continued. “Sir, what I need now is someone who can UNDO some things for me.” How sad I was for him to have to look back over his short life and remember so many things that he’d like to undo.

Mae West once said, “I used to be Snow White. But I drifted.” How many of us, made white as snow by the sacrifice of Christ, have drifted.

So, we can be slaves to bad religion. And we can be slaves to sin. The good news is that **Christ has come to set us free**. Freedom for Paul is life lived in the Spirit of Christ.

Listen to what he says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and selfcontrol. Against such things there

¹ <http://www.trinitycrc.org/sermons/rev07v09.html>.

is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

Here Paul is inviting his readers to a new way of living; to experience a newness of life that the world cannot know.

Sue and I, along with others, participated in a Small Group meeting years ago at the home of Mike and Dianne Stockmeier. The Stockmeier’s had a dog, a sleek beautiful greyhound named Fargo.

“That’s a fullblooded greyhound there,” Mike told me one night before our meeting started and the rest of the group had arrived. “He once raced professionally down in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog, that greyhound.” Then Mike got up to help Dianne and Sue with the refreshments, leaving me and Fargo alone in the sunroom. Fargo turned to me and asked, “This your first visit to the Stockmeiers?”

Undaunted by a talking dog, I answered, “Nope. Been here before, some time ago.” “Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami,” said Fargo. “Yes, I heard,” I said. “Heard you retired.”

“Is that the story they told you?” responded Fargo. “No, no, I didn’t retire. I tell you, I spent 10 years as a professional racing greyhound. 10 years of running around that track day after day, seven days a week, me and the other dogs chasing a rabbit.

Well, one day, I got up close to that rabbit, and I got a good look at it. And you know what? It was a fake! I’d spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit! Hey, buddy, I didn’t retire; I quit!” – true story! Exciting things happen in Small Groups!

I wonder how many people feel that way about life, that they’ve been chasing a fake rabbit around and around? If so, it’s time you gave yourself something more. There are millions of people in our land who will tell you they’re bored to tears with their life.

That poor guy at the beginning of our message whose wife pulled the plug on him-- what do you imagine is his greatest complaint as he sits there watching TV night after night? There’s nothing on! Two hundred fifty channels pulse TV on demand, and nothing worth watching. And yet we continue to watch. Surely this isn’t the meaning of life.

Let me tell you the meaning to life. Love God. Serve Him faithfully. Love your neighbor. Find meaningful ways to serve others. That’s it. That’s the meaning of life. It’s a simple formula, but a driving philosophy of my life, established by the Master I follow. Try it on for a while, and I know it’ll enrich your life immeasurably. And perhaps, for the first time in your life, you’ll discover true freedom.