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“Freedom”

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Galatians 5:13-15

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It is highly unusual for me to preach on a theme so closely aligned with a secular holiday; even more so when that holiday is a celebration of nationalism bordering on worship. Introducing the observance of secular or civic holidays into our practice of faith can dilute or confuse the attention that is appropriately and solely directed toward God.

But today felt worthy of an exception to that standard. Firstly, today is the day we observe American independence, a day that only falls on a Sunday once every six years; but because of the leap year, it hasn't happened since 2010. Secondly, the events of the past several months have led me to reflect on the sometimes curiously tangled relationship between Christian faith and American identity. Given the confusing messages from many Christian leaders and politicians alike, it seems prudent to give some attention to this relationship about which so many assumptions are made. Furthermore, this day ostensibly celebrates freedom, a topic our Christian scriptures speak to directly, particularly here in Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

Throughout the letter, Paul makes the case that life in Christ brings freedom from bondage to the law or to the pagan practices so much a part of life in Asia Minor at the time. Paul had planted the church in Galatia during an earlier missionary journey. It was comprised of mainly Gentile pagans who accepted Christ and learned to live in Christian community. They had already turned away from their former practices and toward a higher calling in Christ.

Encouragement in faith and relationship management were always on Paul's agenda in his letters. The more time that had passed since he left, the greater the likelihood they would slip back into former practices and away from his teachings. But there was another complication. Some Jewish Christians had made it a personal crusade to infiltrate the Gentile faith communities Paul had visited. They were zealous legalists, referred to as Judaizers, who insisted that people needed to convert to Judaism before they could become “real” Christians. Judaizers advocated for strict adherence to purity laws and circumcision, things Paul did not believe were necessary in the new covenant made possible through the Christ. Hence, Paul's Letter to the Galatians is a polemic against both the rituals of paganism and the rules of the Judaizers, sometimes striking an angry or frustrated tone. And because of these themes it is often referred to affectionately as the Magna Carta of Christian liberty.

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul makes the case that life in Christ brings freedom. Through Christ, we have been set free from the sin that separates us from God and are given new life in him. Christ's self-giving love also sets us free from the guilt and condemnation of trying and failing to live up to a strict religious code. Freedom is good. But without an ethical framework and spiritual disciplines to nurture it, freedom can be distorted toward self-indulgence. Whether Paul is addressing specific behaviors being practiced in the Galatian church or heading off a charge by his Judaizing critics isn't entirely clear. But his message *is* clear: “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses.”

We hold the concept of freedom as sacred in the United States, along with ideals like liberty, equality, and justice. This is “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” after all. But how well do we understand those ideals? How much thought is invested in the principles we espouse as central to our identity as a nation and as a society?

Often, when we think about freedom, we focus on the individual: the freedom to choose where to live, what to do, what to say, to practice whatever religion or none at all. And those are good things. Fundamentally, we believe in the right to self-determination. As people of faith who believe that each one of us at least in part bears the image of our Creator, we place a high value in people having the freedom to be who they are. But freedom has limits.

Increasingly, it seems that society has stretched the foundational principle of freedom to mean “freedom to do whatever I choose,” regardless of the impact on people around us or our community. We witnessed that attitude throughout the past year with the debate over masks. As community leaders, Church of the Saviour encouraged the wearing of masks both as a matter of public interest and as an expression of faith. We knew that masks serve not only to protect *ourselves* from contracting the virus but to prevent *spreading* the virus to others. Wearing a mask was a small

but effective action we could take to protect and care for one another, which is another foundational principle for followers of Jesus. There are exceptions, of course. Some people have underlying health conditions that make wearing a mask difficult or even dangerous. Masks pose a special challenge for the hearing impaired. But for most people, wearing a mask was simply a necessary inconvenience. However, mask-wearing became a point of contention around the country, politicized and labeled an assault on individual liberty. Conflicts arose. Sometimes, those conflicts were violent. We saw stories on the news. Some of us experienced them first-hand when shopping or running other errands in public. Sadly, for some, the conflict divided not only communities, but even families and households.

The high value we place on individual liberty can cause us to disregard the common good, whether or not that is our intent. A prime example is the value we place on “rights.” The Declaration of Independence that marked our beginning insists that we were “endowed by our Creator with certain *unalienable rights*.” Our Constitution has a *Bill of Rights*, legal protections for freedoms we hold dear. Anyone who’s ever watched a police drama knows the opening phrase of the *Miranda rights*, an essential protection in our justice system.

Theological ethicist Nigel Biggar offers a detailed history of rights from the Middle Ages through the present. He defines a right as “a social institution designed to secure an important element of human flourishing – that is, a good.”¹ Though societies differ in what they consider to be rights, the concept behind them is essentially universal. In his book titled *What’s Wrong with Rights*, Biggar makes a distinction between *legal* rights and *natural* rights. Legal rights are social contracts established by legal authority and enforced by consequences. Natural rights are based on morality and are often assumed rather than explicit. We commonly use the term *human* rights, which can mean the same thing as natural rights, or can be codified as legal rights through international declarations or conventions.

Over time, the term “right” has been applied to all sorts of things to defend one’s sense of justice or goodness. Declaring that something is a right is a way of insisting on the way things *should* be. Biggar has no objection to rights, *per se*; in fact, he finds them essential to human society. But he objects to the use of rights as absolutes that determine policy without careful consideration of the conditions in which that right is granted or assumed. He asserts instead that rights should be the *outcome*, not the premise, of ethical consideration. He pushes back against what he terms “rights-fundamentalism,” applying rights as a substitute for moral or ethical deliberation. He writes, “The problem with rights-fundamentalism...is that it conflates morality with legality, reducing the former to the latter.”² Biggar concludes that we need a more robust grounding in ethics and virtue. He laments how we have suppressed virtue and morality in our society and go to great lengths to avoid public discourse on them:

...acquiescing in the lazy notion that law suffices to structure our public relations and that morality can and should be left at home. But this is not true. We cannot outsource all responsibility for governing relations between citizens to the police, the courts, and penal institutions... we need to muster the courage to own and affirm duty and virtue in public.³

Two examples from our celebrated and hallowed Constitution. The legal protections in the Bill of Rights are essential to the flourishing of our republic. But having a legal right does not mean that exercising it is morally right or appropriate. Take, for instance, the case of a Pennsylvania teenager recently heard by the Supreme Court. A 14-year-old cheerleader who did not make the varsity squad posted a profanity-laced tirade against the school and the cheerleading squad on Snapchat. In response, the school suspended her for disruptive behavior. Last week, the Supreme Court ruled 8-1 that her rant was protected speech under the First Amendment.⁴ It was *legal* for her to do what she did. But that doesn’t mean it was healthy or appropriate. There were consequences to her behavior both for herself and for those who were the targets of her scorn. The legal battle overshadowed what could have been an opportunity on both sides to teach and learn what it means to be a healthy community, responsible for one’s actions and relationships. Instead it was a battle over rules and rights.

The Second Amendment was established to facilitate a citizenry who could be mobilized as militia for national defense, articulating “the right of the people to keep and bear arms.” The degree to which that right can or should be limited is a topic of fierce debate going back decades, and I have no intention of addressing it today. The example I lift

¹ Nigel Biggar. *What’s Wrong with Rights?* Oxford: Oxford University Press (2020), 432.

² *ibid*, 443.

³ *ibid*, 433.

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/23/1001382019/supreme-court-rules-cheerleaders-f-bombs-are-protected-by-the-first-amendment>

has to do with open carry laws. Beginning several years ago, many municipalities and business owners established policies limiting where and how guns can be carried in public. In response, some open carry advocates protested by carrying long guns, rifles, or sidearms into public parks, on downtown sidewalks, or in places of business.⁵ Is it legal to carry such a weapon in that fashion? Probably. But is it ethical to use that legally protected right to intimidate people into silence?

An oft-quoted aphorism states, “Your right to swing your arms ends where another’s nose begins.” That principle can be applied to discussion about legal rights or to the appropriate limits on individual liberty. But Biggar suggests a broader step that should precede any consideration of *rights*. He advocates for a greater emphasis on virtue and duty, embracing ideals like self-restraint, charity, justice, and fairness; rather than using the law as a substitute for ethical and moral consideration.

I think Paul would agree. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he stated, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” (1 Corinthians 10:23-24) In the passage we read today, he is even more explicit. “Don’t let...freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love.” Then he goes on to say why: “All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*”

This weekend, we celebrate the birth of a nation and the principles on which it was founded. None is more sacred to us than the principle of freedom. But let us not allow freedom to become an opportunity to indulge selfish impulses. As followers of Christ, we strive to live as Christ lived and taught, loving our neighbors *at least* as much as we love ourselves. There are those who suggest that our nation was built on Christian principles. If that’s something to which we aspire, demonstrating love for our neighbors would be a good place to start.

I am generally not a fan of singing patriotic hymns in a worship service. I believe those songs are best left to civic observances because the object of their devotion is a nation, not God. That doesn’t mean I’m not patriotic. I love my country and I’m proud to be an American citizen in spite of many things we need to change. But we’re going to sing one today because of what it says in the final verse: “America, God mend thine every flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” That’s a worthy prayer for our nation. We need to take that responsibility as individuals and as a society. In celebrating liberty, let’s remember that freedom must be tempered by self-control and law by the principle of love for neighbor. Individual liberty must never come at the cost of community responsibility and the common good.

As a nation, we have been set free from the tyranny of despotism into a life of independence with a representative government. As children of God and siblings in Christ, we have been set free from the bondage of sin into new life in Christ, characterized by perfect love of God and neighbor. We have been set free for a purpose – to live and to love the way Christ did. May that be our guiding light today and always. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-open-carry-scare-campaign>