

## From Bondage to Freedom

### Proper 8 – Year C, Galatians 5:1; 13-25

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, June 26, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Being a good Jew, Paul's caution to the Galatians about not submitting again to a yoke of slavery harks back to a story most of us of a certain age probably remember best from Cecil B. DeMill's *The Ten Commandments*. You'll remember how the Hebrews, the children of Israel, were bitterly enslaved in Egypt, forced into hard labor, routinely abused and arbitrarily killed. You'll remember the words of God through Moses, telling Pharaoh to "let my people go!" You'll remember the plagues, and the Passover, and the flight out of Egypt to the shores of the Red Sea. And you'll remember how Moses – pretending to be Charlton Heston – spread out his arms and God parted the sea so the people could escape to freedom.

And there they were – on the other side of the sea – Egypt and their oppressors behind them at last – *free* at last. But do you remember what happened next? Their journey to God's promised land had just *started*. They were *always* on the move. The food was horrible and scarce. Even water was hard to come by. The dust and the heat and the fatigue seemed a far cry from the freedom they expected. So do you remember what they said? They decided they wanted to *go back* – to Egypt! They wanted to *go back* to where they could depend on three square meals a day, *back* to where they were sheltered from the elements, *back* to where someone else would make their decisions for them. They *begged* to *go back*, back to their bondage, back to slavery, back to where life was simple and dependable.

The truth is that freedom is anything *but* easy – and bondage has its advantages. Some of us know this paradox all too well, first hand, from the dark, quiet corners of our lives. Some of us know that it is easier to embrace the bondage of addiction than it is to take up the challenge of recovery. Some of us find that it is easier to accept abusive, deplorable or dependent behavior in ourselves than it is to take up the challenge of change. Some of us hold on to deep bitterness and resentment toward others because it seems too risky to take up the challenge of reconciliation.

Here in our own land of the free and home of the brave, we are tempted at every turn to simply accept as normal, parts of our life that turn us into cowards and turn us back to a yoke of slavery. Every day we must ask ourselves tough questions about the source and value of our freedom. Is there freedom for *any* American if we are still willing to hire and fire and accuse and excuse based on the color of someone's skin, or the fact that their family immigrated to this land of freedom after our family did, or the composition of their family? Is there freedom in a society that pays someone fifty million dollars to play a ball game, or sing a song, or just be famously "real," a society where *we* pay fifty dollars to *watch* that game, or listen to that song, while a mother struggles to feed her children from the only minimum wage, no benefits job that she can find? Is there true freedom in a culture that so celebrates violence that we have more murders in a month than other developed countries have in a *year*, that we have to send those we ask to protect us armed and armored to settle family disturbances, that madmen and children end up bringing their own tragic versions of our violence into our schools and into our neighborhoods and into our homes? Our freedom as a society depends on how we answer such questions, day by day, but most especially as we try to steer through the maze of pandering politicians and pundits who would have us believe that there *is* such a thing as easy freedom, where we can have everything for *nothing*, or where we can simply *take* what we want. And yet, too often we take the easy way, abandoning the freedom of true *relationship* and *conversation*, for the slavery of the latest, cheapest sound-bite from left *and* right, the ever-widening chasm of snarky Face-Book-memes, and the willingness to say to one another, "If you don't agree with me, you are *nothing* to me."

You might think that at least in the *Church* we would have this paradox of freedom pretty much figured out by now. It's been nearly two thousand years since Paul issued his declaration and warning to the Galatians, but the biggest problem that the Church faces today is that, just like they did on the far bank of the Red Sea, God's people are just as likely as anyone *else* to slip down the slippery slopes of self-indulgence and self-deception and self-importance, right back into the spirit of slavery.

On one hand we assume that because it has always been done that way, that that way is the only way God can act. And on the other we talk and we behave as if any new thing that comes along *must* be better than the old. In our haste to be relevant and welcoming and affirming, the Church trades relationship for regulation, shoving one another to the margins to win the one percent needed to codify *my* way as *the* way, and too often jumping to the same sort of biting and devouring as the culture we are sent to transform. And then we act surprised when we find that we have been consumed – by each other.

It's a complicated situation, this freedom paradox. But Paul goes on to tell us *how* we can stand firm in the freedom that has been won for us by Jesus Christ at so dear a cost. "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." "For the whole law" he concludes, "is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

You've heard me say it a thousand times from right here, and every other chance I get to say it, (five fingers) love God, love each other. And now, here's Paul saying it again, "Love your neighbor as yourself." *All* of them. *Every* time. *Especially* those with whom you disagree. *Especially* those that are almost *unlovable*. *Especially* those you don't particularly *want* to love.. *True* freedom, you see, is found in looking beyond our own petty prejudices, to see in one *another* the precious gift that resides in *every* human soul. *True* freedom, it seems, lies not in our capacity to accumulate and spend, not in our ability to snatch and defend whatever we can lay our hands on, but in our willingness to give, and to give, and to *give* – of our resources, of our time, of our very *selves* – to bring *all* God's children to the freedom of Christ. *True* freedom, it turns out, is the relentless, driven, unstoping and unstopable pursuit of the well-being of *others*. If you see someone in need, you try to *meet* that need. If someone needs a friend, you *become* that friend. If someone is sick, you *visit* them. If someone is being used or abused, you *stand up* for them. It's just that simple. But it's hard work.

*This*, Jesus said, over and over again, is the Kingdom of *God*. *This*, Paul said, is perfect freedom summed up in that single commandment. *This*, to answer a question that someone asked after last week's sermon, *this*, *this* is the way we write the Vision, *this* is the way we write the vision of the Kingdom of God, *this* is the way we write the vision of Christ's love.