

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

THE GIFT OF FREEDOM

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 July 4, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

It was meant to be a part of our celebration of a century of freedom from British rule. But it arrived 10 years late – in 1886. France made the Statue of Liberty. The United States made the base. The words printed on the base of the Statue of Liberty were written by an Israeli woman. “Give me your tired, your poor. Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless tempest tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” I have been to Ellis Island, and that symbol of American freedom stirs our hearts any day, especially on July 4. As I stood there, I tried to imagine the feeling of those seeking freedom and a new way of life. We are indebted to Rebecca today for her contemporary portrait of the words on the Statue of Liberty. I did not ask her the intent of the people in the scene. To me they represent those countless numbers who have passed through Ellis Island and have become American citizens.

I am not much on bringing celebration of country into worship. To me that is a civil holiday and I like to keep it there. I do remember on this July 4th an event that made me proud of America. I was in Peace Corps in South Africa. The four of us in Zulu class were walking to class – a 25 minute walk from our side of the village. We heard someone greeting us in Zulu. Soon, this older man came out of his house and walked to the street. That meant we would not just greet. We would stop and talk. “I have seen you in our village. I hope you feel welcome. What are you doing here?” We responded, “We are in the Peace Corps and are taking Zulu classes.” “Where are you from?” We answered, “America.” A pleasant but sober look came over his face. Then his whole face lit up with a great big smile. There were tears in his eyes. He spoke sincere words to us. “I am so glad to meet you. I want to go to America, but now I am too old and will not be able to go. I wanted to thank someone in America for the way America stood with us during the struggle. I can’t thank you enough for all your support and help during that time. .” We gave him a hug and thanked him for speaking with us. As I walked away, I realized there have been very few times in my life that I have been as proud of America as I was in that moment.

On this Sunday, July 4, it might be a good day for us to consider in worship the meaning of freedom – freedom as we understand it in a civil sense, and freedom as it relates to us as Christians.

What does it mean, “to be free?”

We could give lots of answers to that question today.

Freedom is being able to make choices from several options.

- the choice to vote for the candidate of our choice at the ballot box
- the choice to select a newspaper not unduly restricted in printing news
- the choice of what, if any, religion we will follow
- freedom to get a drivers license at 16
- to choose a profession
- to choose a marriage partner

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CHURCH

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I think freedom can be described as absence of social, economic, or political oppression. Freedom is the removal of concentration camps, apartheid and starvation. Groups are set free when economic exploitation, racism or sexism is destroyed. And freedom can be spoken of in a psychological sense, the removal of emotional barriers and the healing of past wounds, the coming to grips with internal forces so that they do not control us. There are a lot of ways to define freedom. And I doubt that we are ever as free as we think. Our choices are always conditioned by a number of factors- heredity, culture, immediate environment, publicity, subconscious drives. There are many choices made for us that we do not realize. On this Sunday, July 4, it might be a good day for us to consider this idea that comes from Paul's letter to the Galatians about freedom in Christ.

Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Paul wants the Galatians, and us, to understand that it is more than our external situation that is changed by this liberation in Christ. If you looked at the slaves or the release of prisoners, you could conclude that nothing occurs but the removal of outside restraint. Yesterday they were in chains and today they walk free. More than likely, however, they are the same persons, essentially unchanged. Paul is telling us Christians that God has moved in Christ to set us free. We are no longer bound to task-masters – to evil, the law, and death. We are set apart in the service of God. There is a transference from one dominion to another with the remarkable result that this new service to God is perfect freedom. Our freedom as Christians may overlap with other expressions of freedom. At the same time, our freedom as Christians sharply differs from many expressions of freedom. God's sovereignty over us is not that we are controlled like puppets. God wants us free to make choices for God and for our neighbor. Paul speaks of freedom that comes not from human choice, but a divine choice. The people in Galatia are not "free" to choose circumcision or not, as they will. The decision to be circumcised results in the loss of liberty, a return to bandage the bondage of the law. Paul's idea of freedom is much more radical and realistic than merely the possibility of choice.

In our text for today, we are reminded that our freedom as Christians engages us in a call that carries obligation to neighbor as well as to God – to invest ourselves in the community of faith. This call to freedom impels us to prepare our hearts for worship and to live in community with openness and generosity in a way that our neighbor's well-being is just like our own. Our freedom as Christians is not a freedom that we can do whatever we please. Our freedom is always placed alongside community life. That freedom in Christ is for love. But Paul is quick to remind the Galatians that they are not to use their freedom "for self-indulgence." I think for Paul when he talks about the flesh, he is talking about self-centeredness as opposed to God-centered living. Freedom is a gift from God, and like any gift, it can be misused. Our freedom in Christ is evidenced by our character. Our character is not shown by what we do, but as our text today says, our character is shown by the fruit we bear. That list produced by our freedom in Christ is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. This way of living is the end result of our freedom in Christ.

So today, we can celebrate freedom. And as the People of God, we realize that the freedom we have calls us to a kind of living that always reminds us that we love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the freedom that sets us free.