

"For you were called to freedom...."
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, June 30, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. **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 is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the words of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.
Galatians 5:1 & 13-25

Will you pray with me. Freedom giving God, help us to focus on the fruits of your Spirit which Paul calls to our attention this day -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Remind us that to live otherwise leads us into temptation and turmoil and away from the freedom you offer to each of us this day. Amen.

"In my bed, with my covers over my nose, I feel my warmth vibrating back to me. This is the love I am so willing to give, but have no one to take it."¹ I wish I could say I wrote those poetic words, but I didn't. They were written by a young boy named Crockett when he was in the 7th grade. His poem appears in an amazing book of children's poems entitled *Ten Second Rainshowers*. The *images* of the young poets in this collection are far more profound than most any we might imagine as adults. Some of the *realizations* of children are more on target than any we might discover as adults. "In my bed, with my covers over my nose, I feel my warmth vibrating back to me. This is the love I am so willing to give, but have no one to take it."

I am reminded of a story a good friend told me when I began seminary in the mid 1990's. There were these two little boys who were being very obstreperous and ornry. And their mother was having a very difficult time handling them. So she went to her pastor and said, "Pastor, can you talk to my boys? They're driving me crazy. They're always getting into mischief." So the pastor said, "Sure. Tell the young lads to come to my office." So they came in and the pastor told the littler one to wait in the outer office while he talked to Billy, the older brother. So he takes Billy into his office, shuts the door and sets him down. "Billy," the pastor says quietly, "where is God?" And Billy shuffles in his seat and looks at his shoes and shrugs his shoulders and says nothing. Then the pastor says a little louder voice, "Billy, WHERE is God?" And Billy

¹Sandford Lyne, *Ten-Second Rainshowers: Poems by Young People*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

squirms more, purses his lips, scratches his head, shrugs his shoulders and still says nothing. So then the pastor, in a very loud voice says, "BILLY, WHERE IS GOD?" And with that Billy leaps up, runs out of the office, grabs his little brother's hand, races all the way home, runs into their bedroom and into the closet and slams the door. And his little brother says, "What did we do? What did we do?" And Billy says breathlessly, "I don't know, but they've lost God and they think we had something to do with it!"

Sometimes WE act as if God is lost, don't we? If they came looking for God, would they ask *you* questions first? Or would you be the one asking, "Where is GOD?" "Where IS God?" WHERE is God?" God does seem hard to find sometimes, right? Especially in the midst of life-shattering events, when all hell is breaking loose, when despair reigns and joy seems nowhere to be found.... where IS God?

The apostle Paul had some life-shattering events occur in his life. He had been a devout Jew for the first part of his life. He said to the Galatians in the first chapter of the letter, "I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." (Gal 1:13-14) And then his life changed and it was said of him, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." (Gal 1:23)

What are we to make of Paul's transformation from being a devout, circumcised, law-abiding Jew to being a follower and revealer of Christ to any and all who would listen to his words? His new and renewed passion for his faith in God through Christ drove him to speak out in ways most of us would simply not have the courage to do.

Paul clearly and passionately stated in Galatians what he believed were the differences between Judaism and Christianity at the time. We focused on this last Sunday. But Paul didn't *devalue* the law itself. He was arguing against what he felt was an *illegitimate use* of the law that made observance of that law the grounds of acceptance with God. It was not the *law itself*, but *how* it was being used that was at issue.

Paul said to the Galatians, as Doug told us this morning, "For freedom Christ has set us free.... only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Gal 5:1, 13-14) These were powerful words two thousand years ago. They're powerful words now, yet we sometimes take them for granted and don't follow them.

Imagine what it might have been like to be one of those Galatians listening to Paul's words. Would you have swallowed them without question? Would you have accepted on faith what he was saying? Or would you have wondered if Paul was one of those "false prophets" trying to lead you away from the God you had always known and worshipped through the law? You may have heard of the second great commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself," from your hearing of the prophets of the law, but what about this strange "freedom in Christ" addition?

To us, as practicing Christians, Paul's words make perfect sense. They are the words we have grown up with, or at the very least have accepted as truth at some point in our spiritual lives. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But TRUTH is a very elusive concept. In this country, and around the world, millions of people read words of scripture every week and listen to words of scripture preached every Sunday, or Saturday if you are of other faith traditions than Christian. Yet we hear them in different ways.

One of the most fascinating, frustrating and revealing aspects of being in seminary was discovering how unlike we are in our interpretations of scripture -- as individuals, as members of a church, as members of different denominations. The "word of God" is written in many different scriptures, leading to many different interpretations, and spoken in many different languages with many different accents.

Ansley Coe throckmorton, the President of Bangor Theological Seminary while I was there in the late 1990's, often quoted and agreed with the great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, who once said that a good preacher needs to carry a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other."

I am clear about what this calls me to do -- go back to the scriptures and read them again and again in light of the current news of our time. It calls me to ponder and focus upon a question -- is it the *literal* translation of scripture -- which is dependent upon which literal translation I choose to read -- or is it the *spirit of the words* of scripture which I need to hear and incorporate into my life and into my sermons? Paul says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." (Gal 5:25)

I find myself comforted by the spirit of Paul's words from last week's lectionary reading, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28) Paul didn't discount one group in favor of the other. He proclaimed that *unity in Christ* transcends ethnic, social and sexual distinctions.

But Paul also said that in Christ we are set free to make a choice -- we are set free to "bite and devour one another," (Gal 5:15) or to "love one another" as we love ourselves. There is a problem with that, though. Some of us, many of us, do not love ourselves. In fact sometimes, we don't love or even like ourselves at all. Some days there seems to be a whole lot more biting and devouring going on within ourselves and towards one another than loving ourselves and one another!

What happens in those years beyond childhood when we laid in bed with our covers over our noses feeling our warmth vibrating back to us? What happens to the love we were so willing to give as children, but are so hesitant to give as adults? Just when did we become distrustful of one another, unable to get along with our neighbors, and eager to look out only for ourselves? How did we lose our SELF-confidence and in the process lose our confidence in one another?

It has been said that unity in faith does not necessarily equate to uniformity of thought. We read scripture with our eyes, we hear it with our ears, but we take it in and make it ours through our hearts. We can only make it ours, though, if our hearts are open, ready to accept the words of love in the great commandments. Only then can we accept the love of others as well as give it back to them -- as a 7th grade poet who is "so willing to give, but has no one to take."

Can we learn to trust our hearts so that we can learn to trust one another? Can we learn to love ourselves against the greatest of odds, so we can learn to love one another? Can we answer the question, "Where is God?" without running home and hiding in a closet and responding, "Somebody's lost God, and they think we had something to do with it!"

May each of you feel the *unity of Christ* in this congregation as you "live by the Spirit." (Gal 5:25) and discover the gifts that come from sharing your faith and your diversity.

May each of you *feel the freedom* "to love your neighbor as yourself" as you confront life's daily challenges and struggle to remember the innocent love of childhood.

May each of you have the *desire and the courage* to discover God's truth in your lives, "guided by the Spirit." (Gal 5:25)

Let the people say, "Amen."