

## **For freedom Christ has set us free**

Galatians 5:1

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

This coming Friday is the Fourth of July, the celebration of our country's independence on July 4, 1776. The spirit of the American Revolution is captured well in the motto of New Hampshire: Live free or die.

It's a useful coincidence that one of our texts today is about freedom, Christian freedom. It's Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

What "freedom" means in each case is different, but together they provide our focus for today.

First, the Fourth of July. We Americans have one of the most remarkable political documents in human history—the Declaration of Independence. At the end of his life, Thomas Jefferson said about writing it: "I did not consider it any part of my charge to invent new ideas, but to place before mankind the common sense of the subject."

In other words, he set out to state what nearly all Americans at the time agreed upon. He wrote it is a "self-evident" truth that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator—and not their government—with certain rights, including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Governments existed to secure these rights and derived their powers from the consent of the governed. And when a government failed to do this, it was no longer a just regime, and the people had the right to abolish and replace it, which is to say, they had the right of revolution.

Our Declaration of Independence is read and admired around the world as one of the greatest of all charters of human dignity and freedom. To be sure, it left many questions unanswered. Does "all men are created equal" refer narrowly to the colonists and the Englishmen who sought to dominate them? Or was there a larger and more universal meaning? Do they apply only to males, to land owners? What about women, slaves?

All these questions lay in the future. But in 1776 the fundamental right of self-rule was at the heart of it all. As Jefferson wrote: "The mass of men has not been born

with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately." America became a land of freedom like no other.

The American Revolution was preceded by another revolution: The Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.

Some say that the Reformation was also a revolution about self-rule, but in a different sense. In this view Luther is said to have taught that only the words of the Bible are authoritative for faith and that individuals did not need priests, bishops, or other teachers. They could read the Bible for themselves, and arrive freely at their own interpretation of the text's meaning, according to their consciences.

But that's not what the Reformation was about.

Luther was not saying that you can pick up a Bible, read a passage, arrive at your own interpretation of what it says.

No. He said that the Bible is about sin and holiness, darkness and light, and that the whole point of "The Book" is to direct us to Christ who alone is the light and that that should be the mission of the church, too, to lift high the cross.

For the Reformers, the church became the place of salvation, but not the instrument of salvation. The church is not a hierarchy with some lay people attached to it. The church is a fellowship of believers. The church cannot have a vicar or a priesthood representing Christ because that would mean he himself is absent, that he has left his church. To the contrary, Christ himself is present in his church through his Word and sacraments, and everyone who is baptized into him is a priest.

Luther's Reformation struck like an earthquake through Germany. It led to the renunciation of papal authority, the closing of the monasteries, and the dismantling of the Catholic legal system.

It appealed to people of all stations. It let people get on with day-to-day living, confident that Christ had settled once and for all the problem of sin, death, and the Devil. To be preoccupied with one's motives and works was not only unnecessary, but even irreligious. It showed a lack of trust in the Lordship of Christ.

The Reformation brought freedom. By removing the possibility of earning one's salvation, came also the denial of the need to do so. And with this new freedom came new responsibility. One ought to be a responsible citizen and neighbor, not to

earn salvation, but because we are created in the image of God, and that “image” is “the task” of caring for this world with the best wisdom we can muster.

And that brings us finally to Paul and Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of bondage.”

In the third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew it tells how crowds of people flocked to the River Jordan to be baptized by John, and he asked them: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matthew 3:9)

That’s what Galatians 5:1 is about. Freedom from the wrath. The wrath is sin, death, and the devil.

In Galatians 5:17 Paul writes (paraphrase): “The flesh battles against the Spirit and the Spirit battles against the flesh.” In Paul the word “flesh” does not mean “the meat on your bones.” It means the power of evil, that power that grabs us, ensnares us, and lure us away from Christ.

The Gospel text in Luke 9 describes how this works:

One says: “Yes, but first I have to bury my father.”

The next one says: “Yes, but first I have to go say good-bye to my family.”

Another one says: “Yes, but I have just bought five oxen and I have to go inspect them.”

Another says: “I just got married, and I need to go be with my wife.”

We’re caught by all the things of this world that we are chasing after and the things of this world that are chasing us, that are threatening to undo us. It’s easy to fall away, to lose our bearings.

That’s why it’s important to keep the main thing the main thing.

Galatians 5:1, this “Declaration of Freedom,” is the main thing. “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore; and do not submit to the yoke of slavery.”

What is striking about this Declaration is that there is no immediate equivalent to a concept of freedom in the Old Testament or in Jewish thought. This freedom marks the point at which being in Jesus Christ goes beyond the Old Testament and breaks its association with Judaism.

It goes with 2 Corinthians 5:21, of course. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness [the holiness] of God.”

In him is redemption, forgiveness, freedom. He takes our sin and death and gives us his life and holiness forever.

And then it comes back to John 8:36: "If the Son has made you free, you are free indeed." Amen