

“Self-Evident”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 28, 2020

Scripture Reading: Galatians 5:1, 13-14

¹For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³For 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. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”



Sermon: *“Self-Evident”*

This Saturday we will celebrate our nation’s 244th birthday. That sounds like a lot of years, but it’s actually just a blip in terms of world history. There actually a lot of countries much older than us: Iran, Egypt, Vietnam and India are thousands of years old. Most of Europe is older than us, too.¹ By comparison, the United States is just a pup. I’ve heard it said, that the difference between Europe and the US is that in Europe, 100 miles is a long way, and in the US, 100 years is a long time.

But we’ve had a big impact in that short amount of time, not least of which has been our emphasis on democracy and freedom. When the original gang of rebels put their names to paper and declared their independence from the King of England back in 1776, they did so in a document that stated the following:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”²

When a thing is self-evident, there is no argument necessary to prove it. It is clear for all to see. It is an unquestionable, unassailable truth, like the pull of gravity or the wetness of water. Our founders believed it is self-evident, painfully obvious, beyond debate that God made us equal and free. This nation was founded on that understanding.

But what does it mean to be free? For the founders, it meant being able to conduct business without the interference of the tyrant King George living an ocean away; it meant self-governance; being able to make decisions that served our own best interests and not that of a foreign power. That standard lives on today in our democratic republic; where every citizen gets a say in how decisions are made through their votes; where leaders are elected by the people they serve and when they don’t reflect the will of the people who chose them, they can be replaced. Not that they always are, but they *can* be.

On a personal level, the concept of freedom and what it is to be free probably means a little something different to everyone. To a teenager, freedom might mean getting your driver’s license so you can set sail in your 1999 Toyota Corolla and go wherever you want. To a prisoner, it might mean the ability to make even the most basic daily decisions without having to ask permission first. To a person with wealth, it might mean the ability to buy and sell with minimal government regulation. To someone who is poor, it might mean having the ability to feed your children and provide for your family protected by government

regulation. To someone in a repressive society under a totalitarian government, it could mean the right to vote and to have your voice heard. To someone in a democratic nation it might mean the right to stay home on election day and complain about the results. To someone who has been persecuted and discriminated against because of who they are, or what they believe, freedom might be the ability to say out loud “this is me, this is who I am” and to enjoy the same basic considerations; the same human rights and privileges as everyone else.

But for the most part, we tend to think of freedom as “freedom *from*” something: oppression, influence, requirement. Taken to the extreme this can become a libertine viewpoint that accepts everything and limits nothing. The television show *Parks and Recreation* spoofed this type of thinking with the character of Ron Swanson. In one episode Ron pushes back against health advice and nutrition guidelines saying “The whole point of this country is if you want to eat garbage, balloon up to 600 pounds and die of a heart attack at 43, you can! You are free to do so.”³

We typically see our freedom as being set loose *from* restriction, oppression, prohibition. And while that is certainly a part of what freedom is, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues that in addition to being free *from* something, we are also free *for* something.

Paul is writing to remind his readers that they are not bound by the full weight and stricture of the Old Testament law; they are free. But that does not mean they have no limits, expectations, or responsibilities. Yes, says Paul, we are free, but freedom exercised in such a way as to benefit only ourselves, is freedom misunderstood.

Nelson Mandela, the Nobel Peace Prize recipient and former president of South African who spent 27 years unjustly imprisoned by his government as a political prisoner echoed Paul’s words in his autobiography when he wrote:

*“To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”*⁴

For Paul, freedom meant no longer being bound by the totality of Old Testament law and no longer being forced to carry the burden of endless rules and regulations that governed every aspect of life. But that freedom did not translate into a Ron Swanson-esque life with no boundaries.

To the contrary, freedom for Paul comes with responsibility: to love and care for others as we would love and care for ourselves. Paul writes “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” That may be the most “un-American” sentence in the entirety of scripture. ... Then he goes on to say that the law is summed up in this: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Christians believe that all people are free but for a purpose. For Paul, our freedom is not about being able to advance our personal agendas or protect our own privileges or indulge our wildest desires unfettered. We are to use our freedom to do things that lift up our sisters and brothers and that glorify God.

Freedom comes with the responsibility to love and care for our neighbors. Which I think touches a couple of places in our lives today. I keep reading and hearing people talk about their rights and how wearing a mask and social distancing and taking precautions to prevent or at least slow the spread of COVID-19 is an infringement on their rights. Right after Paul says our freedom is not intended “as a tool for self-indulgence” he encourages us to “through love become slaves to one another.” Which is an unfortunate

allusion given our nation's history. But the basic point rings true. We are to look out for one another. The needs and well-being of other people are supposed to be always before us.

Yes, we are free to walk about without a mask and ignore any threat of disease. But that sort of selfish behavior is a gross misunderstanding; a total corruption of what freedom is. If our exercise of our freedom hurts other people or puts them at risk, then we are out of touch with our Christian faith. Freedom exercised in such a way as to benefit only ourselves, is freedom misunderstood.

Another place where Paul's understanding of freedom touches our lives is in the current struggle against hatred in our culture; hatred that comes in the form of racism, homophobia, and fear of anyone portrayed as "the other." Too many of us celebrate our freedom to live comfortable lives, free from persecution and prejudice while too many of our sisters and brothers do not enjoy those same blessings of liberty. If freedom comes with the expectation that we love others in the same way that we love ourselves, then we can't accept injustice and hatred for others, because we would not accept it for ourselves. Which means we can't be truly free until all of God's children are free.

This will definitely be a strange year for Fourth of July celebrations. No Yankee Doodle Picnic at the church. No big fireworks displays. No baseball games or parades. None of the usual trappings of the holiday. In many ways it will be quiet, almost like any other day. But perhaps that will be a good time for us to consider our freedom and the responsibilities that come with it: to vote, to participate in the system even as we work to change it for the better, to serve our community, to rise to the call when our nation is in peril, but also to take just as seriously the injustice and inequality that is perpetrated daily against our sisters and brothers, and to rise up against that, too.

This nation has come a long way in a short time. But not far enough. If we hold that freedom comes with the mandate to genuinely love others as we love ourselves, then we cannot celebrate justice and equality for ourselves while for others it is lacking.

God made all people in love.
God made all people to be equal.
God made all people to be free.

We hold *these* truths to be self-evident.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "List of sovereign states by date of formation - Wikipedia." 26 June 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sovereign_states_by_date_of_formation#Sortable_list.

² "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." National Archives, 1 Nov. 2015, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

³ Yang, Alan. "Sweetums." *Parks and Recreation*, performance by Amy Poehler, et al., season 2, episode 15, NBC, 4 Feb. 2010.

⁴ Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Macdonald Purnell, 1994.