

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the weekend before Independence Day. As many of you know I am not a fan of mixing secular/national holidays into worship. I feel that we should be able to take one hour or so of a day, even if it is a secular holiday, to focus on worshipping the creator of all things. We can spend the rest of that day or weekend then focusing on whatever else it is we desire, but let's give the Lord what is due.

Today's scripture from Galatians talks about freedom. We celebrate our nation's freedom on the Fourth of July, but what exactly is freedom? I think most of us would say that freedom is the ability to do whatever it is we want to. Of course we would probably add a caveat to that by saying that someone's freedom ends when it infringes upon someone else's freedom. But what does freedom mean when we are talking about Christianity?

Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." This is a beautiful statement. A truly good explanation of the gospel; "For freedom Christ has set us free." This statement also seems to call us to actions that reveal our Christ given freedom. Again I have to ask though; what does that look like?

Right after Paul makes this statement he starts telling people what they should and shouldn't do. In fact he tells us not to submit to the yoke of slavery, and then says we should be slaves to one another. That seems like a bit of a contradiction doesn't it?

I think what it comes down to is that freedom is not the absence of encumbrances; having connections to other people and things allows freedom to actually be meaningful. As one commentator says "Who will be freer: the confirmed bachelor or the husband and father discovering the range of emotions, values, and possibilities made possible through those relationships? Who will be freer: people in a society that voted for leaders who shape the laws that govern them or people in a society in which people have stopped voting? Who is freer: the woman who chooses to take ordination vows that bind her to the church or the one for whom ordination is not an option? Freedom is not separation from relationships; it is a feature of relationships that becomes especially apparent as a result of our relationships with Jesus Christ."

Now it is obvious that not all relationships have that power. I'm sure people could think of some relationships and entanglements that do not foster a feeling of freedom. Not every marriage is good, and not every job is fulfilling. Sometimes relationships don't give us anything good back and then they are akin to real slavery. So then what type of relationships should we try to foster that will give us freedom? Paul pulls from both the Torah and from the teachings of Jesus and says that Christian relationships should have an emphasis in the love of our neighbor. He then expands upon this with a comparison and contrast of the desires of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit.

I think it is important to note here that even though it sounds like Paul is condemning everything of the flesh and praising everything of the spirit that is not really the case. In his list of the things of the flesh Paul not only talks about material desires like fornication and drunkenness, but also talks about spiritual things like idolatry and sorcery. On the flip side the fruits of the spirit include things that are based in the material world such as kindness and generosity. So we must be careful about how we are classifying things. We cannot say that all things material are bad while all things spiritual are good.

In fact Paul's concerns about the flesh are not that the flesh has desires, but the fact that those desires are disordered. In other words we want things that are bad for us, or we want things that are good for us in the wrong way, or perhaps we want too much or too little of them.

So for example: the desire to be intimate with someone else is not wrong; unless we are unwilling to be committed to that person, or we are using them as a tool to fulfill a need rather than seeing them as a person.

There is nothing wrong with searching for the divine; unless we are trying to find it in idols, or in ways that are harmful to ourselves and others.

There is nothing wrong with trying to find joy in our lives; unless we are going out and getting drunk; which can lead to bodily harm, doing things that hurt relationships between ourselves and others, or even worse.

Acquiescing to these disordered desires of the flesh is not freedom. Because those desires can easily take over and we can become slaves to those desires. Ask anyone who has an addiction; whether it is drugs, alcohol, gambling, smoking, or sex. If they acknowledge their addiction they will also acknowledge that they, at least at some point, had no control over pursuing whatever it is that they are addicted to.

I'm told that fans of country music revere the name of George Jones. Jones has had enough hit songs on his hundred or so albums to make the careers of ten singers. Sometime back George was nearly killed in an automobile accident. He was talking on his cell phone. When the news first came out, many of his fans probably assumed that George was off the wagon again.

Along with George Jones' talent and genius comes a dark side. Jones has a reputation for wild living and self-destructive behavior. In the past he struggled with a serious addiction to alcohol and drugs. His addictions were so severe that Jones would literally do anything to fuel his habit. At one time, George was almost outwitted by his then-wife, Tammy Wynette. To keep him away from the local bar, Tammy took George's car keys. But George's determination to feed his addiction won out. He hopped on his riding lawn mower and rode ten miles to the nearest bar. Does that sound like someone who is free to you?

Paul's response to these desires of the flesh is not to reject them entirely, nor are we to surrender to them wholly. Instead we are to desire things correctly; and the way to do this is made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to view those desires of the flesh through the lens of the fruits of the spirit. The Holy Spirit shapes us through these fruits so that we become people that come to enjoy the taste of those fruits. The purpose of acquiescing to fleshly desires should be to promote fruits of the spirit.

It's kind of a circular process. We have faith; which helps us to discern what God has done in love for us through Jesus Christ. And this shapes the way we love our neighbors. And loving our neighbors helps us come around to see what God has done for us all.

One of the biggest questions we have right now in this country is; "Who is our neighbor, and how should they be treated?" It's not that long ago that we touched on the passage in Luke where Jesus answers that question from someone who probably did not want that circle of neighbors to be too big. The story of the Good Samaritan was very specific in its generality. Jesus said that everyone, even those whom we might consider an enemy is our neighbor. The story Jesus told was also fairly specific in how that neighbor was to be treated; with generosity and kindness; above and beyond what would be expected.

Yet it is not difficult for us to find actions made by our country that go against everything that Jesus and Paul are talking about. Where are the fruits of the spirit when we separate families seeking asylum? Where are the fruits in packing human beings into cages? Where are the fruits

of the spirit when we do not allow these people including children, basic necessities like a bed or a cot, a real blanket, soap and a toothbrush, or edible food? These are things that we provide to even the worst criminals in our prison system, yet we are not giving them to people who are running away from horrific situations and are just trying to find a better life. And it's not that we cannot afford to give them these things; through our taxes we are paying over \$750 per person per day to house these people.

I can tell you from my experience as the purchasing agent for three different types of correctional facilities we were able to provide all of those things and more on much less than that. We are treating these people maliciously on purpose; as some twisted form of punishment and as a perceived deterrent to others who may be considering trying to ask for help.

Some will try to say "It's not really happening; it's fake news." Some will say that they deserve it because they broke the law. Some will say "It's not my problem and I can't do anything about it." My question for all of us today is what would Jesus say?

In a few days we will celebrate the birth of our nation; a nation that supposedly values freedom; a nation that was built on the idea that all people were created equal; a nation whose symbol is a statue of a lady holding a torch with a plaque at her base that says "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-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Maybe as a nation we need to think about what that really means?

Regardless of what we espouse as a nation; what do we espouse as Christians? Paul's answer is definite. "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.'" I hope we can all find ways to embrace the fruits of the spirit, to love our neighbors, all of them, and truly be free in Christ. Amen