

*Copyright June 29 & 30, 2019. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church*

**Title:** Fruitful Freedom

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [John 8:31-36](#)

**Text:** [Galatians 5:1, 13-14](#)

**E-mail:** [Randy Spleth](#)



Let start with a little trivia. See if you know who said this: "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death? Anyone know who said this? It was Patrick Henry, at the Virginia Convention in 1775.

I bet this one I bet is easier. Who wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable right—that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It was Thomas Jefferson of course and it's The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.

Here's one. "One nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all." Obviously, that's the ending of our Pledge of Allegiance but does anybody know the author? It was a minister named Francis Bellamy. He wrote it in August of 1892 and it was first published in a youth magazine the following month. He modified it in 1923. But what I just read was modified by Congress at the recommendation of President Eisenhower. Worried about the communist threat to our nation, the phrase "under God" was added in 1954. As a pastor, I like the addition even though I'm not sure that it always accurately reflects who we are.

Freedom is on my mind as it should be yours with the Fourth of July coming up this week. It was clearly on the minds of the Continental Congress as 13 colonies declared independence and freedom from Great Britain 243 years ago. But the idea wasn't unique to them. Over three thousand years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it was on God's mind when he saw the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt. God sent Moses to demand of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" When Pharaoh refused, God delivered them to freedom.

A thousand years later, God's people where again oppressed, this time by an occupied force, the Roman Army. God sent Jesus to announce a campaign

for freedom, to usher in the kingdom, "... to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free." (Luke 4:18-19). You may recall that Jesus was run out of his home town synagogue in Nazareth for reading that passage about freedom from Isaiah. But still, Jesus stuck to his message of truth and freedom, later telling those who would be his disciples that in him "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32).

Even though we like to think that freedom is uniquely American, it isn't. It is who God created us to be. In the beginning, God created us, man and woman, as free, moral agents, with the capacity and responsibility to act independently. God didn't create us to be puppets nor does God sit in heaven pulling strings whenever God wants us to do something. No, God wants us to be free. The inalienable desire for freedom is not just a function of the human spirit. It is the gift of free will that God hard-wired into our very being. It's who we are created to be. And it is why God sent Jesus. Paul says it this way: "For freedom Christ has set us free....." (Galatians 5:1a.)

But that freedom really isn't at all like what we will celebrate this week on Thursday. Too often we think that they are one and the same, that freedom is literally the pursuit of unfettered happiness. It is the belief that you can do what you want whenever you want. I was reminded of this mentality by a lovely lady this week who told me about her faith journey. It was at a dinner in Orlando, a meal honoring special servant leaders at the International convention of Kiwanis. Well into her eighties, she and her husband are from Alabama. Upon hearing I was a Christian Church pastor, she revealed that she had grown up in a narrow, fundamentalist Baptist church. She said, "It was a church that had a rule for everything, usually a rule against everything. We had rules against dancing, against playing cards, against going to the movies, and even against mowing the grass on Sundays. She said that she would sneak over to our church so she could be free. That's where she met her husband. "I liked that church because, we were free to believe anything we want, and our behavior was our own business, not anybody else's. That's the way it should be."

While I found her and her husband to be delightful and I think, good, moral people who are generous and committed Christians, I am confident that isn't the kind of freedom for which Christ has set us free. I am also confident that for many of us, it is what we think freedom is, the belief that you can do what you want whenever you want. We aren't the first to suffer from this misunderstanding about the freedom which Jesus offers.

Paul addresses this problem in his letter to the church in Galatia. It had a big problem around this freedom issue and they were clearly divided into two camps. There was the "do whatever you please" camp and on the

opposite end, the "freedom requires restrictions and rules" camp. The picture of the "do whatever you please camp" wasn't pretty. Paul says that they had chosen to use their freedom for self-indulgence and as a result, the freedom to love had turned into licentious and impurity, the freedom to worship into idolatry. The freedom to thrive had created envy and jealousy, the freedom to eat and drink, had led to drunkenness and gluttony. The freedom of speech had turned in factions, quarrels, and dissension. This "free to do whatever I want" group were a mess and had been for some time because Paul had warned them before. In response, Paul says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sister, only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence." (Galatians 5:13)

The other camp wasn't any better. It was made up of people who believe that freedom required lots of rules and restrictions. They were Jewish Christians who perceived that the newly converted Gentile Christians didn't have the freedom to simply embrace Christ. To be a "true Christian", they had to submit to the laws, customs, and rituals of Judaism. They thought that it was absolutely imperative that they adhere to the requirement of every religious ritual, the most significant of which was circumcision. This camp said that freedom in Christ is all well and good, but that they felt much more secure remaining within the thousands of laws and regulations. Ironically, they were so caught up in this commitment to the law that they too, were party using the freedom of speech to create factions, quarrels, and dissension.

Just as Paul was passionately convinced that freedom isn't anything goes self-indulgence, he was also passionately convinced that freedom isn't found in a zealous observation of rituals and requirements. So he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

Ironically, these two groups were so at odds with each other about what freedom meant that they were destroying each other. "...you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." (Galatians 5:15) We might do well to heed his caution, for the rhetoric about what freedom looks like today sounds as if it is as cutting as it was in Paul's day.

So what would Paul say freedom is? It "...is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14b) According to Paul, that is the only thing that counts: faith working through love. That's what it means to be free in Christ. Freedom really means being liberated from the prison of self-indulgence, the shackles of "me, myself, and I." But it also means to be free from the burden of the

laws, the slavery of rules and regulations. To be free ultimately means to embrace the gift of freedom that Jesus has given us and then, live and be led by the Spirit. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25)

How will that look like? According to Paul, it will look like fruit, fruits of the Spirit. Freedom grows when we live by the Spirit and are guided by the Spirit. Paul calls them fruits because they aren't works. They are things that are being done in and through us. That is to say, that these fruits are cultivated in us by the Holy Spirit and not achieved through our own efforts. What are they? "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23a) Fruitful freedom comes when we open ourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit in us, transforming our lives into who God truly wants us to be. If God created us to be free moral beings, then God understands what needs to happen in us and through us, to reach our fruit-filled potential. Through the gift of Jesus and that action of the Holy Spirit, God wants love and joy, peace and kindness, gentleness and self-control to be manifest in the world, through people like you and me.

Just as each generation of Americans must learn anew what freedom means for our country and what our Pledge of Allegiance maintains, so every generation of Jesus followers must learn again what freedom means in faith. It's what Paul is teaching here. Freedom isn't doing whatever you want or the other extreme, keeping a lot of rules and regulation. It is about one thing. It's about the freedom to choose, not avoid, freedom to responsibility, not freedom from responsibility. That's what Jesus demonstrated for us when he set us free. Jesus freely chose to empty himself and take the form of a servant, freely chose death on a cross. It is why Paul writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sister, only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves for one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14)

The church is to be a place where in freedom, you see the on-going fruitful work of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Paul ends this section of the letter with the impassioned plea for freedom saying, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." By the will of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, freedom and responsibility belong together in our lives and in the life of our faith communities.

The same is true, I believe, for our nation. One of America's greatest gifts to the world is the notion of religious liberty. The state cannot impose religion,

and all our citizens are free to exercise religion or not, according to their own wishes. But that does not mean that people of faith do not have a crucial role to play in the life of our nation. We ought to be working every day to create a society that is marked by a concern for the common good. We ought to be listening for the voices of those who are not being heard. We ought to be speaking out against excessive self-indulgence and naming the corrosive consequences of greed. And we ought to be speaking out about the threat to free speech which has created factions, quarrels, and dissension. It has done exactly what Paul said it would do when he wrote to the Galatians so plainly in this regard, "If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."

So on the week when we celebrate our nation's birth, I am reminded of another line penned about our freedom and country "...purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain." That's Katherine Lee Bates description of America and the fruit was found on the plains beneath Pikes Peak. But it could and should be more with her prayer written along with it, for God to shed His grace on thee. Join her with that prayer that the fruit God's grace might encourage is within all of us, fruits of love and peace, kindness and generosity, gentleness and self-control and bring us and our country fruitful freedom.