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July 6, 2014
Deuteronomy 6:20-25
Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

FAITH AND FREEDOM

On Friday, with a bit of a breeze, the flags were not flagging in showing their colors, the fireworks were working in showing theirs as well. It was a time to celebrate something accomplished long ago. In response to King George III, colonists boldly demanded to be free to govern themselves, free to live and prosper. I know our celebration on most July fourths focuses on the beginning of what would lead to the United States, but it is a day that has inspired more than the people who live within our shores. There is a governing philosophy, even a theology, espoused in the Declaration of Independence, that all people are created to be free. Obviously, the colonies that would become states did not live up to that great ideal from the start. Even the author of the document did not live up to his ideals. But Thomas Jefferson's words have inspired many to aspire to live with a measure of freedom.

But seventeen centuries before Jefferson's words, there was an epistle addressed to early Christian communities in the Galatia region of Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. The Apostle Paul wrote to them about how they were created to experience freedom. They were a part of the Roman Empire, which was not the most freedom loving world power. The American colonies in 1776 were a part of the British Empire, which also used its power in ways to benefit itself, rather than those over whom it reigned. So the Continental Congress adopted Jefferson's declaration. But Paul's idea of freedom went beyond just the political realm. He pointed the Galatians to the source of freedom, the One who had not stayed away from the political realm in freeing their spiritual forbears from slavery in Egypt, the One who also came in the person of Jesus to free them from the oppressive forces of sin as well as the overly-strict, even oppressive observances of the Hebrew law. The Galatians encountered challenges from within and beyond their communities of faith. They had reasons for despair and heartache that could snatch away any experience of freedom. But Paul told them that in Christ, they had been set free. By God's love and grace, they were freed from all that could hold them captive. He wrote, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

On this holiday weekend, we are not only Americans rejoicing in our wonderful freedom, which many have fought for and died for, and we are deeply grateful for it. Another part of our identity, a foundational part is that we are God's people, who have been delivered from that which would keep us from being free. We have as part of our heritage that God freed our spiritual forebears from the drudgery of slavery in Egypt and in this land. By God's grace, we also are lovingly liberated from the figurative prisons built by those who don't believe in grace, who say that salvation can only be earned through strict obedience to a long list of rules and laws. By God's grace we are also lovingly liberated from the prison of 'me, myself, and I'. Death and despair also no longer have the grip on us they once did because of the total giving and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We celebrate these experiences of freedom that can transcend any experiences of oppression and restriction.

But as stewards of the freedom of which we have been given, we are called not to misuse it. I was at the beach with four generations of extended family this past week. When we first

arrived, the red flags were up, which meant that conditions were such that the lifeguards determined it was not safe to go swimming very far out into the ocean. Those who are familiar with riptides know how powerful the undertow can be. But one of the youngest of our extended family proclaimed that since the lifeguards got off work at 6 p.m., we were then free to swim as far out in the ocean as we wanted. It was an opportunity for a parent to explain to the child why they would not be using their freedom to do that.

The freedom we experience through Christ gives us great latitude, but it also calls us to a particular kind of living. Paul says, "You are called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another." The liberation we come to know in Jesus Christ calls us to a specific way of living. We are not just free from something; we have been set free for something.

We are a people with a purpose and a task. Our freedom is not to be used for obsessive self-indulgence, but for loving and serving in the world. Our freedom is not for consuming and wasting all the resources that we can, fouling creation for others, but for sharing God's good gifts in wise and responsible ways. The freedom we are given in Christ is not so that we can force our ways or our desires on others; our freedom is for working cooperatively for the reign of God in the world.

No longer bound by the powers of sin, we can seek to live selflessly for others. We don't have full power to live like that on our own, but God's Spirit empowers us to live fruitful lives in relation to others, lives that are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, lives that show generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Wouldn't you like to be free to live in those ways? By God's grace, we are! No longer doomed to an endless death, we can join with the work of the Spirit moving toward the abundant life God intends for all people in the world. No longer held captive to oppression or in prison to our own selfish desires, we can work for hope and life and freedom for all people everywhere. When we are really free, our life with God and for God, in freedom, in service, is the most fulfilling way to live out who we are. In the waters of baptism, we have been claimed for God's work giving hope, peace, love, justice and care!

When we love someone, and we see that they have a need that we can help to meet, then we live out our greatest freedom in ministry to that one we love, inspired by the One who first loved us. This is a time to celebrate and live into something accomplished long ago. We do so by living in ways that show that God's love has liberated us and wants to liberate everyone else to fully be who they were created to be. We follow Paul's declaration of dependence, dependence upon God's loving Spirit to experience the greatest freedom we could ever know.