

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JULY 4, 2010

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/Independence Day

Scriptures: Psalm 30 and Galatians 5:1, 13-26

FREE FOR WHAT?

It was good to start off on this Independence Day morning by singing “The Star Spangled Banner.” Do you know the story of the minister and the very best organist? It seems there was a minister whose church had a series of substitute organists while the regular organist was on medical leave. This particular church was about to begin an ambitious building program. Its facilities were in such bad condition that the members had decided it would be better to build a whole new church rather than spend money to renovate the one they had.

The minister was convinced that they could easily raise the money. There were several hundred members in the church, and he thought that if each one would pledge at least \$1000 they would be able to finance the construction. On Sunday morning he explained this to his large congregation. He noticed that some of them scowled at him as he spoke, but he was not dissuaded from continuing with his idea. He said in a forceful voice, the kind of voice an evangelist might use, **“Everyone who will pledge \$1000 to the church for a new building, stand up.”** And at that very moment, the organist began to play quite loudly the National Anthem! And that is why the minister knew that he had in his church that morning the very best organist!

Years ago I worked with some people who belonged to a church which taught that many things were against the law of God, things I could not understand. I want to be clear that this church was not in Oceana County. I respect those whose churches have different teachings from my own, but I do have questions. What was interesting to me back then was the fact that a lot of restrictions that applied to women did not apply to men. For instance, women had a dress code, whereas men did not. Women

could not wear anything but skirts, but men could wear pants, shorts or whatever. I was told that the rule was because women are supposed to look like women and men like men. When I tried to point out that there are cultures where pants for women are considered normal dress, and that men in Scotland have worn kilts since the 1500's, I was looked at like I was a heretic.

Women in that particular church were also not allowed to wear makeup or to cut their hair— ever! Of course drinking, smoking, dancing, movies, theater, and card-playing were all out. In return for giving up so much and obeying the rules of the church, the members were expected to be in church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening, and Friday evening! They were expected to give a tenth of their income to the church and to support and obey the pastor whether you agreed with him or not! And women could not be pastors, preachers, teachers, deacons or anything else. It was good if you knew how to play the piano because that was an acceptable way for women to serve the Lord. In all things men had the last word, whether in the church or in the home. If a woman disobeyed, she was subject to the discipline of the church board and the pastor (who were, of course, all men). Freedom was not a big word in that church.

Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Paul could not understand why anyone who had been saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and freed from the bondage of the Law would want to go back to the old way. Why would a freed slave want go out and find a way to clamp the chains back on his wrists? One of the problems Paul had with Christians in his day was concerning the matter of circumcision. Whereas male Jews had been required under the Old Testament law to be circumcised as part of the old covenant between God and his people, Jesus Christ brought in the new covenant purchased for us by his blood. During the service of Holy

Communion we hear the words from Luke, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Similarly from 1 Corinthians, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." And from Matthew's gospel, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The blood of Jesus is sufficient for all time, and there is no longer any need to undergo the rite of circumcision to fulfill the Law.

The problem arose when Jews who became Christians told new converts to the faith that they must undergo circumcision. They were confused because they thought that a person had to, in essence, become a Jew before becoming a Christian. Paul said no! A Gentile does not have to do anything else but to come to faith in Christ, and Jews can stop trying to keep every little letter of the law. Jesus came in fulfillment of the Law. But if a person still works at keeping the law and keeps making sacrifices to atone for sin—well then, Christ has died in vain! Christ was the only necessary sacrifice to atone for sin for all who believe in him!

On the other hand, being a Christian does not mean you can do anything you want to. As Paul would say, "But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love." Christians are to be about the work of God which ultimately is to love. Paul was stern with the Galatian believers. They had caused him a lot of grief because they had not always stayed faithful in their daily walk. He wrote to them, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law."

Paul lists a number of sinful behaviors which will cause Christians to go down the wrong path. He warns that they must be led by the Holy Spirit. Those who are led by

the Spirit will exhibit certain traits in their lives. He wrote, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

Max Lucado wrote this little story:

Near the city of Sao Jose dos Campos, Brazil, is a remarkable facility. Twenty years ago the Brazilian government turned a prison over to two Christians. The institution was renamed Humaita, and the plan was to run it on Christian principles. With the exception of two full-time staff, all the work is done by inmates. Families outside the prison adopt an inmate to work with during and after his term. Chuck Colson visited the prison and made this report:

"When I visited Humaita I found the inmates smiling- particularly the murderer who held the keys, opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with Biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs...My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key in the lock, he paused and asked, "Are you sure you want to go in?"

"Of course," I replied impatiently, "I've been in isolation cells all over the world." Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the Humaita inmates-the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross. "He's doing time for the rest of us," my guide said softly." (unquote)

Jesus Christ died for you, so that you may be free to love fully. Don't go back to the way it was before you knew Him. Those who paved the way for our freedom as Americans would not want us to go back to the way it was, to go back to being under the British crown. They would want us to live free. Nor would those who fought for freedom on the battlefields of history want us to go back. They too would want us to live free. The pilgrims and pioneers, the Presidents and lawmakers, the explorers, those who cleared the forests, those who built the roads and railroads, those who started cities in the wilderness, and those who bravely took their families into the unknown— each of them helping to make the America we know today. They would want us to live free in a free land.

The apostle Paul had the same desire for those early Christians whom he nurtured. He told them to live by the Spirit because Jesus has made us free. Jesus has done time for all of us! Thanks be to God! Amen!