

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, June 27, 2010
Fifth Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 8-C
Galatians 5:1,13-25; “Live By the Spirit”
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One Sunday some years ago in Middlebury there was one week when not a single high school student was at church – not in worship, not teaching in Sunday School – they were nowhere to be found. Now, you might think that’s not unusual but it really was there in Middlebury – maybe not all of them were there every week, but a good proportion of them were very faithful in their attendance.

It was the weekend after the Pomperaug High School graduation – you’d think many of them were still celebrating with their friends – and maybe that was true for some of them. Others may have left with their families already for the summer.

But the reality was this: most of our youth were at the Pomperaug High School participating in the 24 hour Cancer Society Relay for Life – it had started on Saturday at noon and ended about noon that Sunday. They were there doing their part in the walkathon to raise money for Cancer research.

On the Friday before, I asked one of the guys – a high school junior – why are you doing this? The quick and first answer was to raise money. But then he launched into a list of people he knew who had been touched by cancer including the 18 year old brother of one of his friends. He said, “I used to think that cancer was out there somewhere but it really didn’t bother me. But that’s not true anymore – it’s everywhere and we all want to help. This is something we can do.”

Every once in a while there’s the opportunity for some theological reflection with our young people – and that’s really fun. It’s one of the things that I enjoy most about our confirmation classes and have loved to do as I have worked with youth over the years. They are so honest and have deep and profound questions about their faith – I am honored when such an opportunity arrives. So I took advantage of this one that day back in Middlebury as Shawn and I went to my home so he could put in my air conditioner. We talked more about the whys of the Relay for Life.

What we ended up with was this: if we believe that we are indeed bound together as children of God, then we must take care of each other. We must care about each other. We must help each other in whatever way we can. We don’t have a choice. We just do it.

In his wonderfully straightforward way, he said to me – I couldn’t, we couldn’t, not do this. What was really cool was that he didn’t see this as a burden, a should or an ought, but an opportunity. His joy in participating was wonderful – he felt a calling, if you will. And it was hard to articulate, but being “bound” to participate in this Relay for Life was not slavery – at least not slavery as we usually think of it.

And there you have it – the best description I’ve ever heard from a young person, actually from anyone, of what it means to be free in Christ. The whole paradox of freedom, being bound together in freedom – symbolized by our young people walking for

the Cancer Society on a beautiful summer day, right after graduation, because they couldn't do anything else.

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

Freedom in Christ is not freedom *from*; it is freedom *to*. Freedom in Christ is not freedom from all responsibility or concern for others. Freedom in Christ is anything but self centered – in fact, it's exactly the opposite!

As I thought about this it occurred to me that perhaps that's one of the differences from being spiritual to being religious. For some people being spiritual can be so very self centered – the journey is about them rather than about God. That's not true with Christianity at all. Freedom in Christ means entering into a more gracious way of living. Freedom in Christ is about the freedom to love, to live by the law of love - that commandment to love God and neighbor. Paul says it this way: to become slaves to each other out of love for God. And it's through God's Holy Spirit that we enter into service to God and neighbor.

Paul got himself into all kinds of trouble as he spoke about this law of love, about God's grace - he said the old law had been replaced by this new law - to be a Christian, the Gentiles didn't have to become Jews first. It was radical teaching and preaching and it did eventually get Paul killed. The Jewish authorities did not take kindly at all to Paul's attempts to destroy the morality, the rules of the Jewish faith at the time.

Paul to this day continues to teach us how to live this Christian faith to the fullest. To live in a freedom that can be a paradox to be sure, but to live in a freedom that shows us what Jesus meant when he said, "I have come that you and I might have life and have it abundantly." He spells it out for us in this letter to the Galatians:

1. We are free from having to earn our way into God's favor. Christ has liberated us from a religion of rules and regulations so that we can have an authentic relationship with God. Don't slip back into the old ways that made you feel distant from the Lord - he cautions the Galatians. And how easy that is to do.

Paul's mission into Galatia brought a breath of fresh air. Why? Because God is gracious. We are already loved and nothing we can say or do can cause God to love us more. We do not have to earn God's love – in fact, we can't! We need only accept and respond to it. This was especially good news for those Jewish believers who had spent a lifetime trying to earn and deserve God's love. But the Jewish teachers continued to contradict this teaching about the grace of God: believing in Jesus is all well and good but you still have to keep the law - the law of circumcision, the laws of ritual cleansing, the laws of food preparation. But Paul says, "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Why would anyone want to go back to slavery? Because we are vulnerable to what we have learned, to what gave shape to our earliest years, to what we are used to - even if it is toxic.

A young woman goes to a new congregation and discovers a whole new spirit of love, acceptance and forgiveness she had not known in a church before. She had come from a dysfunctional family, had experienced an abusive marriage, difficult divorce and had been roundly criticized and even shunned by her very conservative church. Her experience in a new, healthy spiritual environment was liberating. But suddenly she

stopped coming. Someone reported she was back attending her old church. One of her new friends visited with her and discovered the reason.

“It didn’t feel right,” she said. “I went home feeling good every Sunday. There’s so much I’ve done...so much sin in my life. I shouldn’t be feeling so good about my life. It’s more normal at my old church.”

In Christ we are free of toxic religious bondage. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: we are forgiven.

2. We are free to let love lead us.

Freedom is not, nobody can tell me what to do! Freedom is not personal autonomy. Every confirmation class has a member who truly believes that confirmation means, “I don’t have to come to church anymore and nobody can tell me what to believe.” I know I’ve heard that....and I know I’ve seen it. Christian freedom is being interconnected – and isn’t that a paradox.

Freedom in Christ is also not - since God loves me unconditionally and saves me by his grace, it doesn’t matter what I do. There is a story that comes from the early days of the Billy Graham crusades - during a Los Angeles crusade a well known gangster was invited by a friend who had experienced conversion. The mobster actually responded to an invitation to receive Christ at the crusade. Later that evening the new convert attended a meeting which included some key leaders in the Graham crusade. When asked what he was going to do with his new life, he said, “I guess I’ll be a Christian gangster.” He was quite serious - he thought that he could simply continue with business as usual and spend “Christian” to his name like others did.

Paul says, “No. Christ has set us free from, but he has also set us free for. We have not been set free to indulge ourselves but rather we have been freed to live in the love that can lead us into genuine community. Becoming slaves to one another means that as we embrace the love of Christ, we are then given the ability to love for Christ. This freedom does not simply set us free to drift about in a self centered world - it helps us become everything God designed us to be - through life in genuine, love-centered community - like the community gathered at the High School at Relay for Life. We all know that love is the greatest healing, encouraging, nourishing power on earth and when that love is without limits or conditions, we begin to gain a glimpse of what maximum living is all about.

3. We are free to reject it.

With God there is no bondage. Our ability to choose is never revoked. Paul’s longest section in this reading has to do with choosing to live “by the spirit.” There is always a struggle going on within us. Verses 19-21 list the works of the flesh, list the end results of self-centeredness. If we are honest with ourselves, something in these few verses will grab us – we’ll recognize ourselves somewhere.

Is it jealousy or envy? How about anger or quarreling? Idolatry? Drunkenness, carousing? Dissensions? Factions? Impurity? The truth is we are all vulnerable to these works of the flesh and God will not overrule our ability to choose. How many times have we heard someone say, why doesn’t God make me stop? Doesn’t work that way, does it.

Something on this list touches all of us - we’re not alone, are we. And we find out that what seems to be fun isn’t so great sometimes. What sounds good at the time can turn out to anything but. How many times have we said to ourselves, “Wow, I wish I could take that back.” Life which is not given and guided by the spirit is minimal living.

We just don't realize it until sometimes it is too late. The truth is God honors our choices. If we persist in choosing self-centered living, God will allow us to have it our way.

But there is another way. It is the way of the Spirit. It is freedom for maximum living. It is the result of choosing the guidance of the Christ who dwells within us. It is the fruit – it's the natural result of giving way to the Spirit within each and every one of us.

Somewhere on this list is the thing you would most like to have as a quality of your daily living: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. What is number one for you today?

If we really belong to Christ, as Paul puts it, our vulnerabilities will diminish and the fruit of the spirit will increase. You see, God really does have a better idea.

As we take the time and make the commitment to seek the person, the presence, and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will see a harvest of the fruit of the spirit. Maybe that's some prayerful thinking we can do during these summer days when the pace is a bit slower – what is it that God is calling us both individually and as a congregation to be? How will we respond, take our place, in answering that call both individually and as a congregation? Where are we tied down, in bondage? Where do we need to be set free by the love of the triune God? Will we open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit working in and through us?

I pray we will. May we nurture and then reap that harvest of the fruit of the spirit together and know the freedom that can only come in true discipleship to Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, make us free, and we shall be free indeed. Free us from excessive care and concern about ourselves; fixation with our health, consumption with our security, constant worry over money. Free us from the fear of the future, anxiety about how others judge us, worry about our children and how they will grow up.

Remind us, Lord, of that which we so easily forget - your constant care for us, your loving forgiveness of us, your bold acceptance of us, just as we are.

Lord make us free, and we shall be free indeed.

Free us for greater concern for the needs of others, especially the poor, those who have not been blessed with our opportunities, those for whom life has been difficult.

Free us for service to the world beyond our families and friends. Show each of us the little things we can do to make life more bearable, the world more lovable for those who have experienced much pain and ugliness in life.

Lord, make us free, and we shall be free indeed. Amen.