

July 4, 2010

Psalm 30

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

What kind of Freedom do you have?

For freedom, Christ has set us free. Therefore, do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Christ has set us free. For freedom. And freedom is definitely a word that fits this weekend. Freedom is what we celebrate on July 4. The freedom we claimed when we declared our independence. Freedom from injustice. Freedom from bossy foreign governments. Freedom from tyrant kings. The freedom that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights—that among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We knew we were meant for freedom.

Freedom is a what we talk about this weekend. In the midst of cookouts and parades and pie baking contests and sparkler-waving and fireworks displays. Mixed into all of that are some thoughts on liberty and freedom. But do we take the time to stop and think what that freedom means? What does it mean to be free? As citizens, but also as Christians. What does it mean for us to have freedom in Christ? What does it mean when the apostle Paul gets up on July 4th and announces that Christ has set us free? What does it mean? What is this freedom that we have? Now, I know this is a holiday weekend and our brains are on vacation. But I'd like for us to think for a minute about what freedom is. And what kind of freedoms we have. Maybe you think about the freedom of speech, the freedom to practice the kind of religion you like, the freedom not to be persecuted for it. The freedom to assemble where you want and print what you want and debate what you want. The freedom to have a fair trial. To have fair elections and fair leaders and to pursue whatever it is that you want to do. We can get up in the morning and make some coffee and sit on the porch and do the crossword and enjoy life because we live in a peaceful free country ruled by laws instead of violence. We have freedom instead of the oppression of North Korea or the Congo or or Afghanistan or Haiti. And I hope we feel a little bit lucky to them and that people were brave enough to fight for them.

We have freedom in our lives. So much freedom. But if you are like me, you don't always think about your freedom. You don't always appreciate it. Because even in the land of the free, we don't always feel free. Even though we can vote and see whatever movies we want, in the rest of our lives, we don't always feel free. We aren't free from what has to get done. We aren't free from the daily grind of work. We aren't free from the daily oppression of school. We aren't free from minding our parents. Or minding our wives. We have those projects to work on and the deadlines to meet and we have to clean the house and straighten the garage and pay those taxes and file that claim and mow that yard and finish that sale and get to those lessons and call that plumber. And it's like sometimes we are anything but free. We are tied up. We are owned. And the only breaks are long holiday weekends on the 4th of July. When you don't have to do anything. And you can get up at 10am. Eat cold pizza. Forget to brush your hair. Listen to Neil Diamond because you want to. Wear two different kinds of plaid because you want to. And watch some golf because you want to. And because the announcer talks really soft and you can take a nap. Ah, we love these days of freedom.

It's not often that we get freedom like that, to do whatever we want. To not have to do things. To not be chained to that computer or glued to the phone that's always ringing and beeping and vibrating. To not have all those deadlines. To not be constantly worried about what our boss will think and what our neighbors will think and what the other parents will think and what our friends will think. To be free and not have all these concerns.

When I was a kid, I was pretty sure adults had freedom like that. They could do whatever they wanted. They could drive. They could watch R rated movies. They could get cool jobs and make money and buy whatever they wanted and do whatever they wanted. Did you ever feel that way when you were a kid? But then you grew up and you got a car and a job and an apartment and an electricity bill and a water bill and a cable bill and a credit card debt or two and all that freedom just wasn't there. So you think just wait til I make more money. So get a better job and a bigger check and a bigger house and a mortgage payment and a pool and a bigger TV and the stuff that the kids want and you still aren't free. And you think, just wait til I retire. But then, your back isn't doing so well and your hips are starting to go and the doctor is worried about your cholesterol. And your finances won't allow that beach house in Florida. And your parents need help at home and your kids have moved back home with you. And the freedom you worked for isn't there.

If only we had more freedom. If only we could do what we wanted to do. If only we could have things our way. Because that's what freedom seems to be about. That's what the message is out there. That we should be able to do what we want to do. That we shouldn't have to do what we don't want to do. No one is our king. No one is our boss. We make the rules.

That's the freedom that the world presents to us. The freedom of You. The freedom of what You want. Have it Your way, says the world. It's all about you. This is your freedom. The freedom to choose what's right for you. The right jeans and the right shoes and the right station wagon. The right friends. And the right living room décor. You have the freedom to choose from five different types of peanut butter, twelve different kinds of milk, thirty different kinds of spaghetti sauce. Forty-five different kinds of cell phones, and 300 different TV channels. You choose. It's what you want. This is your freedom.

But all this choice, this freedom to do what we want. It hasn't made us any more free. Instead of liberating us, it has enslaved us. To stuff and things and money. To the demands of a demanding world. It has tied us to maxed out credit cards. Shackled us to corporate products and consumer goods. Tied us to cheap oil and cheap coal. Made us feel trapped by the activities we have to go to and the games we have to get to and the work we have to do and the things we have to buy. And it seems like freedom, but it isn't. It is slavery to what the world says and what the world values. What we have to and ought to do.

Now maybe some of that rings a bell. But maybe you're thinking, I'm pretty sure I'm not a slave. Slaves are people in chains and stuff. They wear tattered robes. They are stuffed into ship galleys and row to the sound of a beating drum. Slaves are bought and sold and work on plantations 18 hours a day in the kitchens and fields. Slaves are owned. And slavery like that isn't around any more. But it is. Wherever people serve something other than God. Where people work so someone other than God will love them. Where people put other things before God because they believe that something other than God will save them. Their money, their connections, their work, their activities. People are enslaved. To the next deal and the next award. To the next high of drugs or alcohol. To the next thrill of hooking up with a hot young thing this weekend and the next and the next. To filling their lives with shopping bags that will fill the void. Do what you want. It's your freedom the world says. But God says, it's slavery. And all of us, all of us, are captives. To the approval we seek from our peers. To the priorities the world sets for us and our kids. To the coveting of what others have and the worries about the future and the hurts that we can't forgive. In big and little ways, we all know the slavery of this world.

But it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. For freedom that releases us from ourselves. A freedom that delivers us from our struggles and doubts. The freedom that Christ gives us to let our lives be about one thing. Just about loving our neighbors as ourselves. All the other stuff doesn't matter to God. In Christ we are free to not choose all those things stress our families. We are free to not live frantically. We are free from what the world values and we are free to enjoy what God values. We don't have to worry about all the choices. There is only one choice to make. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love, because you are freely loved by God. Love is what matters, not what we have or what we produce. In Jesus Christ God loved us and set us free. Therefore, therefore says Paul do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, freedom from that self-oriented life that the world sets you on. It isn't about you and your performance. It's about serving one another. That's where your freedom is. You are free when this life is no longer about you. It's about who you are in God. When you can let go of what the world wants and trust God enough to put what God wants first. To not be slaves any more, but free in the love of God that will not let us go.

So what kind of freedom do we have? We have freedom in this country like no other, hard-won, justice-focused freedom. But in Christ, we have a freedom that truly sets us free. Freedom from our past mistakes. Freedom from fear. Freedom from the world that would make it all about us. Freedom from the pressure that this life is it, so live it up now. Because we have life beyond this life in Jesus Christ.

For freedom, Christ has made us free. So let us not be slaves to a world that would make us less than we are. For in Christ there is only one thing that matters. All we have to do is love one another as God has loved us. Only one thing matters. That we love one another at this table where Christ's body is broken and forgiveness is poured out. Only one thing matters. That we live as people who are freed by the grace of God. So let us take the bread and raise our glasses to freedom.