

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost • July 4, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Galatians 6:1-16

“Freedom: Freed for Community”

This weekend, our nation celebrates its independence from control by a foreign power. The Fourth of July holiday, at its core, is meant to be a reminder of who we Americans are as a people: We, as a nation, are free. But what's the point of that freedom, do you think? On the global scene, we're no longer a colony which is managed by another country; however, we've found that our nation needs to be an active participant in the international community. Self-determination isn't the same thing as isolationism. But I'm guessing that most Americans don't think about July 4th in terms of international relations or geopolitical policies. When it comes down to it, Independence Day is a day of national pride and a celebration of the freedom that we enjoy as citizens of these United States of America. For the most part, Americans are free to be, to do, to speak, to study, to worship, and to work as they will. But we are still citizens, and as citizens, our freedom isn't meant to be about our independence. We are members of a nation, part of a larger community.

Christian freedom isn't about being independent, either. For these past several weeks, we've been exploring this notion of Christian freedom as Paul expresses it in his letter to the Galatians. At its core, Christian freedom is an altogether different thing than American freedom. Christian freedom isn't independence: it's *dependence* on God's grace. Our hope for being made right with our Father above isn't based in the works that we do, the religious rights or practices that we follow. Our hope is based in Jesus the Messiah, the crucified and risen one. That's Christian freedom.

You and I are daily tempted to take our freedom for granted, both as Americans and as Christians. In America, we're increasingly confronted with the message that individuality is more important than community. As a consequence, we're developing a growing sense of entitlement: if life is all about me, then it's easy to think that I *deserve* whatever I desire. That inflated sense of self comes from excessive pride, leading us to think that we're better than others. And this even plays out on the national level: we become self-absorbed as a people, believing, in practice, that the planet revolves not around the sun but around the United States. If that's a hard thing to consider, reflect on this: the World Cup is the biggest sporting event in the world, but how often do most Americans even think about soccer – or, as most of the rest of the world calls it, football? In contrast, our country, is often at its best when we work together to use what we've been given, in service to each other and in service to the rest of the world.

Last week, we heard Paul encourage the Galatians to live by the Spirit in the freedom that they have through Christ. This week, as he brings this letter to a close, he encourages them – and us – in a concrete way in which we live by the Spirit. You've heard how the Judaizers had come and misled the people into thinking that they had to follow Jewish rituals like circumcision in order to be saved. But now that Paul has proclaimed the message of Christian freedom, a message which the Galatians needed to hear, he also gives his hearers some specific directions as to how they're to live in that freedom they now possess.

All those who follow Christ, who are adopted as God's children through our Savior, **are freed for community**. I wonder if we American Christians might be even more in need of this section of Paul's message than the Galatian Christians had been. We're not independent creatures; we're not meant to be. Paul tells us that Christians – all Christians – aren't meant to look out for their own interests to the exclusion of others. Rather, the Church is, in many ways, a team. The freedom that you and I have in Jesus as our Savior lifts a burden from us, because we don't have to worry about working to earn redemption. God has removed a heavy load, a load that'd burned down our strength in our attempts to carry it. And now that it's gone, Paul tells us, we can use all this newly-

freed energy to serve the people in the world around us, especially within the community of faith. As a team, we support one another. There's only one superstar on the team, Jesus; therefore, we shouldn't compare ourselves with other believers to think ourselves better. Similarly, the better we know ourselves and see how dependent we really are, the less likely we'll be to boast in our own achievements, our supposed superiority. As Christians, we are meant to support one another and to work together as we battle with temptation. We must always speak the truth in love and reach out to our brothers and sisters in the faith when they are entangled in sin. And then we must all the more share forgiveness with each other, welcoming others back with open arms – just as God has forgiven us. Christ is the captain of our team, and we follow his lead.

God has freed us for community here at St. John's. So how might you and I better serve each other and do good in this community? Get to know your fellow believers, and let yourself be known by them in turn. I admit that I still don't know the people of our congregation as well as I'd like, even after four years. (I hope to be able to do more to get to know you better!) Here in the shadow of our nation's capital, I'd guess that a lot of us are reluctant to be seen as anything less than self-sufficient. We don't want to let our defenses down, even in the community of the Church, for fear that we'll be perceived as broken or inadequate. We all have to look like we're *something*. Here's the reality, though: in many different ways, we are all broken and inadequate. But God has freed us to support each other, to bear one another's burdens. In order to help each other and provide for that support, we have to know when there's a need. And for that to happen, we each need to make an effort, both to get to know each other and to let ourselves be known. Today, if you see someone in worship and you don't know their name, go introduce yourself to them. Similarly, if you have already connected with someone, but it's been awhile since you last really caught up, invite them out for coffee or a meal and spend time deepening that connection. You and I have already been welcomed in as members of the community of the cross. We have been freed to love and serve those in the household of faith, even as Christ loved and served us.

Through Paul, God encourages us to do good to everyone. As American Christians, we enjoy the freedom to serve our nation – and the rest of the world – as we live out our faith. We are part of a community as citizens of our country. This Fourth of July, let us all pray for our elected leaders, that their efforts are wise, unselfish, and God-pleasing. We might not always agree with the decisions they make or the positions they hold, but these men and women need God's guiding hand, both as individuals and as public officials. As citizens, we have the right to speak out against domestic or foreign policies that demonstrate a selfish pride or a lack of care for others; what's more, as Christians who would serve others, we can and should do so.

Independence Day is not a religious holiday. We're not here to sing praises to America; instead, we thank God for the many blessings that come to us as citizens of this nation. But more than these, we praise our Lord for the freedom which we can experience as we live as the community of faith. So to the people of this community of faith, with Paul I say: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters.*

Amen.