

Freedom in Community
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For Freedom Christ has set us Free.

For Freedom Christ has set us Free. What a good line to ponder as we look forward to the 4th of July. It's also a good line to reflect upon as I begin my first Sunday in ministry here at St. John's UMC. This is my 16th year in ministry and I think it is St. John's 30th year as a chartered Methodist Church. I became licensed as a local pastor in 1996 and you were given your charter as a Methodist Church in 1986. Today we are recognizing that we have contracted together in the name of Christ to be a community that will do ministry together.

It seems rather appropriate to look at Paul's letter to the people of Galatia. They were a small group of people who lived in what is northeast Turkey today. Paul got that church started, and then he moved on. After he had moved on, he wrote back to them a letter on the meaning of Christian freedom and Christian community. I thought he might have some ideas for us as we begin our ministry together. Paul was looking at what the differences were between spiritual independence and spiritual community. He was asking the people in Galatia, what is spiritual independence? What does it mean? What is spiritual community? Are these two things a paradox? Can we practice them both at the same time?

Well Paul was trying to tell the Galatians that freedom in Christ was not a license to go crazy. He apparently was worried that Christians in Galatia believed that because they were forgiven by Christ, they had the freedom to go out and do whatever they wanted and Christ would forgive all. Apparently they thought it meant that they had the freedom to go drinking, carousing and leading a life of sin and all would be forgiven.

Paul was trying to say "that's nonsense." Freedom in Christ is freedom to model our behavior after Jesus. It's a freedom that says it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. "You were called to freedom," says Paul, "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence." Well, that's pretty clear. Paul is against drinking, carousing, and leading a life of sin. What is he in favor of then? He says, "Through love, become slaves to one another." He knows that if we behave with love toward one another we will not behave in selfish ways. "Love your neighbor as yourself," says Paul; "that is the most important law to follow." He challenges us to love one another as Jesus loved us and to serve each other as Christ served.

The liberty we celebrate on Independence Day is the liberty to love our neighbors; that's spiritual community. Actually, Paul is telling us that we have total license to go crazy with the works of God. Well, hello, that does sound kind of fun! "The fruits of the Spirit," Paul tells us, "are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." There is absolutely no regulation against having too much

joy, or being far too patient. Go ahead, Paul says, knock yourself out. There is no law against it.

When is the last time somebody said to you, “would you please stop being so glad to see me every time we meet?” “Would you please stop encouraging me and supporting me?” Well, I can’t personally remember ever having to say this to someone. It would be more like this:

“Hey, what’s happening dude?”

“Not much.”

“Well, you are so helpful to me. Every time I see you, you have a smile or a good word to say. You’ve totally got my back all the time. I trust you. I just wanted to say thanks!”

“Okaaaay... So would you cut it out? Enough already.”

Who is going to say that? No one. No one complains when you are really glad to see them. No one is going to put a limit on generosity and the love, joy, patience and kindness we all show each other.

It’s true you know. When you walk around judging everyone, when you mentally put labels on, when you think to yourself, “He’s lazy. She’s disorganized. She is so messy. He doesn’t like me. He never talks to me,” then you actually project that and you affect those people. However, when we walk around being loving, it’s incredible how people respond.

Once when I was the director of a volunteer agency in San Francisco, there was a new employee at the church across the street from our office. We had an arrangement with the church so that we could use their social hall every two weeks for our volunteer meetings. The church also had a senior nutritional program. They fed about 60 people every day for lunch. They got a new director of the nutritional program. She was a big woman; she was gruff and it seemed to me like she felt we were in the way of her nutrition group. They finished up in the church social hall at about 1:30 pm and our volunteer group of about 50 started coming in around 1:30 for their 2:00 pm meeting. The first time I met her, I thought she seemed angry and sure enough, she called the church pastor next day with a list of complaints about our group. The next two times I encountered her, I felt like she was cold and just looking for things to be critical about. To tell the truth, I was a little frightened of her. I was afraid she might not want us around and we wouldn’t be asked back to use the social hall. I was young and fairly insecure myself.

One day I decided I wasn’t going to take it anymore. I was not going to let her boss me around. This was it. On the day our meeting was scheduled to take place in the church social hall, I went over early, full of purpose. I saw the lady and I strode up to her. I threw my arm around her and with a big smile I told her how glad I was to see her. I told her how much we appreciated her letting us use the social hall. I told her how well kept it looked since she had arrived. I told her she looked very nice today, which she did.

I asked if she had changed her hairstyle, which she had. I don't think I gave her a chance to speak; I just kept my arm around her and kept talking. I could feel her tense body relaxing and a smile start to grow on her face. Finally I guess I ran out of breath and had to stop. She started to chat and ever after we were the best of friends.

Now is the time for us to get to know each other; for me to know you and you to know me. God may also be asking you to get to know someone new who's in particular need of encouragement. I don't know, but please think about it. On this, our spiritual Independence Day, let's break free from being stingy with our God-given love. Nor with God's peace, kindness, and patience. Paul gives us total license to go crazy with good works. We have a new church year coming up; we have a community of loving big-hearted people here ready to go with spiritual good works. So let's unleash our gifts on each other and on the community. Let's do it in the name of Christ!