

Freedom- what for? A reflection on Galatians 5: 1-6 -- June 21, 2020

By Rev. Elisabeth

“For Freedom Christ has set us free!” Wow.

I think any teenager must like this verse.

Any non-conforming person with a rebellious Spirit must love this verse.

Anyone who has suffered from rigid expectations imposed on them by their community of faith must love this verse.

And can you imagine how this verse must have sounded in the ears of forced labourers and slaves who had been given the bible by their masters to keep them subservient and humble? Dynamite!

This verse is only one of many verses in the letter to the Galatian Christians, which proclaims freedom. This letter has been called the “Magna Charta of Christian Freedom”

Religion and freedom? Do they go together?

Certainly many many people experience exactly the opposite. I am sure you have friends who belong to the group of the disenchanted, or the “nones” in the Stats Canada section on religion. For them religion, “organized religion”, is about rules and requirements, do’s and don’ts. They expect to be confronted with unreasonable demands and they expect to find out that there is a double standard. Indeed, its no secret that many of the strictest people in church leadership may themselves be guilty of the very things they tell congregants not to do – ever. Once someone has experienced this disconnect, they are gone, often forever.

Church as a place of freedom? People hurt in this way would find that absurd.

But there are also people of faith who don’t want freedom in church. They seek out religion precisely because it offers structure and safety. They crave the “law”, they want to follow clear teachings and even outer rules that assure them of their salvation and their being right with God.

25 years ago the sociologist Lawrence Iannacone published influential research on why “strict” churches have seen so much growth since the 1960ies , compared to the kinder more “genteel” ways of the mainline churches like ours. He says that from a sociological point of view, people join or ”buy into” a church that makes high demands on behaviour, beliefs and pocketbook because this will weed out people who take more than they give, thus providing a community of very committed, highly motivated folks who are more likely to help each other. In other words, the strictness provides a “better religious product” says the sociologist.

This may help us understand why Paul had such a battle on his hands – with a congregation he founded, taught in the ways of Christ, but whose people then, once Paul was gone, became very attracted to revert back to “strictness” and clarity of who is in and who is out.

We do not know the exact circumstances of what happened in the Galatian churches, but we can reconstruct. The Galatians had become Christians under Paul’s missionary activity. They were baptized, and built up communities of “the way”. They had been pagans, never following the Jewish law before. But after Paul’s departure it seems that they were confused and intimidated by other Christian missionaries who said to them that they can not be proper Christians without following the Jewish religious law. That means that the men have to be circumcised. And it seems that the Galatian Christian men, wanting to do right and wanting to pay the “higher price” for membership, considered it.

In response, Paul gives his all in the art of persuasion he can muster. There is no other letter in the entire Bible that is as passionate in tone.

I imagine Paul sitting somewhere in a bazaar, dictating to a professional letter writer this letter: a barrage of sharp questions, lines that show outrage, even insults... , (yes write down how appalled i am!)

Paul dictates also elegant arguments, but many passages sound more like a desperate parent trying to convince their child to turn away from bad friends, or from drugs, from the looming threat of a downward spiral.

Paul even calls himself a parent in chapter 5, and the despair he feels over the Galatians at the crossroads is obvious. He makes threats (everything will have been in vain, you will cut yourselves of from Christ if you do this) In

case the threats dont work, he tries pleading, if the pleads don't work he tries saying "don't do it- for me, because I know you love me". And finally: "I wish I could be there in person with you. I just don't understand you. I want to be with you."

I am moved by his passion, but I know you may wonder why this mattered so much then, and even more so, if it matters to us now.

I think the question of what Christ and our freedom have to do with each other matters intensely, don't you?-

"Law vs freedom" doesnt quite look the same any more of course.

Circumcision is not an issue any more for Christians, but other ethical issues have sure come up since. Abortion is one, the question of same sex marriage is another. Should Christians approve of "assisted dying" is a third. There are many more questions which divide the church. So what is the answer?

You see, there are two obvious paths: The path of strict traditional morality, and the path of libertarian-ism. "Everything is allowed, as long as it does not directly hurt another or impinge on another's freedom".

Pastor Alan Brehm says it well in a reflection on this text:

"I would have to say that we're going from the frying pan into the fire here. We as a culture are ... confused about freedom. We think freedom means "I can do whatever I want, whenever I want to." We confuse freedom with "license." License means you don't care about anybody else, so you have no qualms about doing whatever you want, regardless of how it affects others. It's a matter of indulging yourself however and wherever you please. But what that misses is that there are always consequences to our actions and choices. Pure self-indulgence never results in real freedom."

Do you remember the movie "Breakfast at Tiffany's"? I confess I watched this famous film for the first time last week- thanks to Netflix.

Apart from the performance by Audrey Hepburn, I found it remarkable because it illustrates just that confusion around freedom.

Think of the delightful scene at the end when willful and freedom loving (but deeply unhappy) starlet ?? throws her beloved cat into the gutter during a

rainstorm and seems determined to go to the airport and follow her fantasy about wealth in South America. She is on a “freedom crossroad”:

About to lose for good the one true friend and lover she’s ever had, she finally realizes that real freedom is freedom to give one’s life “for” and “to” another; and that there is nothing more precious than love, (including for a wet and obnoxious cat who needs her).

Much of secular society follows the path of “everything goes” and “strict” churches follow the path of the “law” . In the first case, people may and do damage to themselves because “everything goes” is not healthy- neither for body nor for the soul. In the second case, religion may and does damage people. (Another recent Netflix film I quite enjoyed is “Unorthodox”. It portrays the slow escape of a young woman from her ultra orthodox Jewish neighbourhood in Brooklyn, and how she finds a new life in modern Germany)

So to the third way: difficult, but the only one that gives mature and true freedom: Paul leads us there and lays it out so passionately and defends it at all cost. The way he has understood from Jesus, Paul who once was an orthodox believer himself . He lays out that Christian freedom is freedom from the law and the strict rules. But freedom is not only freedom “from” it is also “freedom for” something. Freedom for faith, “working in love”.

Whoever finds themselves in Christ Paul says, is free to act as the Holy Spirit inspires. Love becomes the highest value and the only ultimate norm for our decisions. Love of course for Paul is not about fuzzy warm feelings. Its the self-giving love which Jesus modelled, always focused on what the other needs in a given situation. But its so difficult to determine what the loving thing to do is, isnt it? Absolutely. Thats why God offers the Holy Spirit to come to our aid.

The very nature of the Holy Spirit is that “she is like the wind”, “blows where she will”, “alights and withdraws as the dove...” She needs to be on the move because everything changes. Times change. Circumstances change. Ever new circumstances present themselves and we are free to respond to these as God’s Spirit helps us to discern.

“Breakfast at Tiffany’s” is a secular movie, but doesn’t it seem like she was touched by the Holy Spirit in that decisive moment, when she made the right decision in the taxi?

“Loving myself, how can I best express love for my neighbour and love for God in this situation?” That is the question we ask in our freedom in every major decision every time.

Not all will agree. That too is a result of our God given freedom.

For Freedom Christ has set us free...! Freedom from restrictive religious law and convention, and freedom also from the abyss of endless possibilities for self indulgence. Because we are set free from having to follow strict observations we now have freedom and time for doing the loving and kind thing in our time, in our unique situation.

Become aware of how you are using the immense gift of freedom God gave you?

In my own religious journey this would be the biggest realization: God gave me freedom from having to condemn and judge and freedom to embrace and accept as I have been accepted by God in Christ- with all my faults.

Thank you, Paul for your passionate letter.

And Thanks be to God!