

True Freedom (Galatians 5:13-16)

We have experienced a sobering Independence Day this year. In the past this day has seen the baseball season in full swing, vacation plans made and anticipated, large outdoor BBQ's with family and friends, and massive fireworks displays—it's been a "feel-good" break mid-year. But this year, not so much. No baseball, no great travel plans for vacation, COVID-19 cases surging once more, and social unrest. The nation is in limbo, there is a splintered national psyche, there are factions among us dominating national conversation. There seems to be a loss of our collective self and identity. The truth we're seeing is that crises rarely form character, but they do reveal it. And we seem to be at a crossroads moment: who are we as a nation? Who do we want to be?

The cracks we're seeing in America's character are, perhaps, leading indicators that as a nation, we have been sacrificing the common good on the altar of individual liberty. We have indulged too long in what Jake Meadow calls personal sovereignty at the expense of our collective well-being. And the church of Jesus Christ, which has the ability to lead the way forward out of that malaise, finds itself co-dependent and impoverished having sacralized the individual over the whole.

If we want to regain our squandered opportunity at leadership, we do well to hear Paul's teaching in Galatians, and take it to heart. For our credibility to lead doesn't come through political power or will, but by example, through humility and wisdom. Demonstration compels attention that then seeks understanding which can lead to outcomes consistent with God's purposes realized for all. Nations don't become great because they simply claim allegiance to God. A nation becomes great when its doctrine is shaped by people whose character is formed by the practices of virtuous human relationship which are embedded in the image of God resident in all. The church can fulfill its destiny as the teacher of nations as it displays the outcomes of these practices in its own life and engagement in the public square. In a crossroads moment, the church can add its voice in suggesting who, as a nation, we want to be.

So we turn our attention to Paul, in the passage that Andy read for us moments ago, where in chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul affirmed our freedom as Christ followers. In the immediate context of the passage, Paul is referring to freedom from what had become the mechanistic burden of the Law's requirements where the focus had shifted from who you are within, to what you do in terms of appearances. When the heart is unchanged, the Law becomes a burden because it is seen as restricting one's inclinations—in a very real sense, this is what Paul means when he references the flesh. The flesh is the self-directed life that lives without regard for God. The consequence of having that life is the outcome of sin in the world that robbed humankind of its sense of location in God's life. Human beings became self-referential, self-absorbed, and personal sovereignty became our guiding value. The mantra of personal sovereignty, or the flesh, is "I want what I want, when I want it, and for as long as I want." This sounds like freedom, but is actually an illusion fostered by the captivity of sin.

The freedom Paul references is release from sin's captivity, which, according to his thought in Romans 8 came through Jesus' action on the cross that set us free from the law of sin and death. We are freed from the idea of personal sovereignty as our

highest value and freed for life and peace—vs. 6 of Rom. 8: the mind governed by, or living under the sovereignty of Christ through his Spirit, dwells in life and peace.

In a nutshell, this is Paul's affirmation of our freedom in Gal. 5, but here's the rub, he urges us to resist indulging in the flesh. It's a warning against falling back into the trap of personal sovereignty. Christ followers don't lose their personal will—the ability to make choices—when they commit their lives to Christ. Here, then, is where we listen closely to Paul who urges us to use our freedom in Christ to serve one another humbly in love. It's freedom from self to freedom for the sake of others. The question before us is: how can I commit my personal capacities to the well-being of others? And he doesn't mean anonymous others, but those near to us, those we know, the ones with whom we regularly engage, the ones in our spheres of influence or immediate community.

Remarkably, Paul says, when we orient our lives in that way, the entire law that previously seemed so burdensome, is fulfilled. This corresponds again to his thought in Romans 8 where he taught that the outcome or promise of Christ's sacrifice is that the righteous requirement of the law will be fully met in us. In other words, God's design for the welfare of humanity is realized as each of us humbly serves one another in love. This is the experience of peace—in biblical language you'll recall that peace is much more than just the absence of or resistance to hostility. Peace carries with it the provision of everything that leads to well-being or flourishing. You can refrain from outright hostility towards another, but still not wish them well. That's not biblical peace; that's a truce. Biblical peace brings about the means to well-being, by concern for the welfare of another. This is the fruit of loving a neighbor as yourself. It is recognizing a solidarity with your neighbor. Again as Meadow describes it, it a sense of shared membership with another person. Shared humanity is enough of a starting point towards love, but when Jesus taught that we are to love our neighbor as ourself, he didn't necessarily mean an emotional response. He meant that we are to see our neighbor as an extension of ourselves—that the blessings we enjoy are meant for them as well, that they are also entitled to welfare, to well-being, to opportunity.

For the Christ follower, the community of the church is the laboratory where this kind of love is practiced and experienced. And if we're being honest about it, we haven't always lived up to this. The personal sovereignty piece is hard to shake off, particularly when we live in a culture that worships personal rights and entitlement. But again, listen closely to Paul who urges us to serve one another, how? Humbly, in love. The humility piece is critical—it's the piece that reminds us that we're not better than others—our circumstances may be different, our opportunities may have been different, but our value is equal and, as we've learned in the past few weeks in our study of Mark 12, when we first love God deeply, with every fiber of our being, we grow to love what and who God loves. We want for others what God wants for them. And when we get to that place, love for our neighbors becomes the natural and easy expression of this. And while we haven't always been at our best in this, it doesn't also mean that we've never done this—more often than not we have; God's blessing and peace have been realized. It typically happens when we allow others into our lives, when we invest time in knowing one another, when we've allowed ourselves to trust one another, and that trust becomes the channel through which the love of God flows.

Now all of this enters into our national conversation as we take this to heart and apply it in our public life. There's nothing in what Paul says here that limits it strictly to the household of faith. It absolutely should apply especially to the household of faith, but it doesn't end there. To live into this is to prefer solidarity over personal sovereignty. That is to say that we recognize our shared membership with those around us. We are all created for the same pleasure and fulfillment, which is the joy of knowing and loving God, but we tend to forget that this develops as the result of experiencing God's love first. The apostle John wrote that we love because God first loved us. Our love is a response to God's love. And God's love pours into the world through the lives of those who love God. In other words, people who love God are the means through which God's love touches others. Whether or not others ultimately return love to God is not our call. Our call is to make God's love available, accessible to them in ways that make sense to them. Practically speaking it means to humbly serve others in love, to work towards their well-being, to promote practices that contribute to the common good, to level the playing field so that all have the same opportunities to flourish, to ensure that all can enjoy what God intends for them and us together.

You see, here is where America seems to have lost its way. Our founding documents enshrine as unalienable the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But as I've read these documents, I note that nothing in them requires me to help others attain them. They say I'm entitled to these, but nothing compels me to ensure these to others. They say quite a bit about personal liberty but little about shared responsibility. Perhaps this was assumed by the founders, but that's faded in the shadow of personal attainment. Friends, this is where our light as Christ followers must shine. We know of inequities in our public life. We know disparity exists. We know that injustice exists. We know that personal sovereignty has overwhelmed our concern for the common good. What will we do with what we know?

There are Christians who lament that the church in America has been sidelined, that we're no longer mainline in the culture where we had a voice that our country respected. I'm not sure that's a negative. On the margins may well be the best place for us right now because it puts us in touch with others who have been equally marginalized. Rather than clamor for a return to center stage, we do well to focus our attention on the vulnerable, the helpless, the oppressed, the weak. That, in fact, is where the church was birthed, on the margins, and on the margins is where the love of God began to pervade the world—the values of the kingdom prevailed there on the margins, and the love of God overflowed from there.

What voice will shape the character of this nation going forward? How about the voice of God's love expressed on the margins that will, by example, flow into its heart? Let's be that voice. AMEN