

Freedom
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Galatians 5:1, 13-25

One week ago and 157 years ago, June 19, 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed and two months after the Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, enslaved African Americans in Texas were informed that slavery had ended. Despite the formal surrender, the Confederate Army in Texas had continued to fight on until mid-May. “Juneteenth,” it is now called, a long-time holiday in Texas and other communities; this year for the first time, a federal holiday.

I was in central California last weekend, visiting a congregation as part of a grant I received. The church acknowledged Juneteenth in worship. It also mentioned Father’s Day, which fell on the same day. The day before, in that town, Paso Robles, I wandered to the town square and observed that community’s Juneteenth celebration from the periphery.

The end of the Civil War and the end of slavery is worth celebrating, even a reflective celebration.

A few weeks back, I drove to the mountains of western North Carolina, to Montreat, a Presbyterian conference center, for the first in-person church conference I’ve attended in two years. Montreat is a special place in the Presbyterian ecosystem, particularly in our former southern stream, and the leadership there is working very hard to deal with the legacy of its racist practices. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, could speak at Montreat, but he couldn’t stay there.

Still, what left its deepest imprint on me was the drive down and back, where in yard and field after yard and field, on bumper and hat and t-shirt were representations of the Confederate flag, including massive, massive flags waving in the breeze, impossible to miss coming up route 81. I confess that I felt more than a little uncomfortable. I could only wonder what my Black Presbyterian

friends felt, driving on that same highway. What a juxtaposition, some 157 years and a week after slavery formally ended in this nation.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.”

For freedom Christ has set us free. The apostle Paul is writing to the small band of churches in Galatia. Paul is concerned that already they are wandering from the faith. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning...” Some of Paul’s letters encourage; this one admonishes, and seeks to correct. “You foolish Galatians,” he calls them.

He builds the case and builds the case and builds the case that the Galatians are slaves – and we must be mindful of how we use and understand that term – are slaves to the law for its own sake, are slaves to the old ways of living, are slaves to culture, are slaves to other gods.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” The Galatians, and by extension all of us, need to embrace the freedom that Christ has secured for us, freedom from the law and its oppressive ways, freedom from all those things that prevent us from living fully as God intends us all to live. A clarion call: Christ has liberated us, set us free, and we are called to stand firm in that freedom.

Douglas Bratt writes that “Paul begs his readers not to surrender our freedom by returning to the slavery that is the assumption that people must obey the law in order to be in relationship with God. He urges them to live, instead, in the freedom that comes from a faithful reception of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”

Richard Hays writes that we “must be aware of confusing the freedom of which Paul speaks with nationalistic discourse about freedom.” And we must.

So what does Paul mean, if not the freedom we understand in our history and our practice? And how does the freedom Paul articulates for us lead us to think about freedom in this moment in our history? What are the connections, the mandates, the calling?

Teri Ott writes that “In Christ, we are not freed *from* responsibility, not freed to do whatever we want, or freed to indulge in self-centered desires of the flesh. Rather, in Christ, we are freed *for* love, freed to care for, respect and cherish all lives.”

The renown New Testament scholar N.T. Wright reminds us that Paul “reminds his Galatian readers not to use that freedom to satisfy our sinful nature. Christ has, after all, graciously set Christians free — but only to live out our faith in love for each other (and, by extension, God)...Part of the ‘freedom’ Paul so cherishes ... is freedom from the enclosing, sometimes claustrophobic, inward-looking communities that serve only their own interests. Being set free from those restrictions opens up a wide field in which love can seek out those whom it will serve.”

In fact, as Bratt observes, Paul claims “that while Christ has freed his adopted siblings from slavery to sin and slavish obedience to the law, Christ has freed us in order to enslave us to each other.”

Hays writes that “Freedom in Christ manifests itself through the formation of concrete communities where the old barriers of nation, race, class, and gender are overcome...the freedom of which Paul speaks is freedom in Christ, a freedom that says it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me...it is a freedom for life in community, a freedom for mutual service in love.”

Liv Larson Andrews asks “How is Christ’s freedom different on our tongues than other cultural messages about freedom, messages that too easily become words of hate? Or a grasping onto privilege? Far too often,” she says, “the cry for freedom is shouted loudest by those who don’t want their privileges hampered by their neighbor’s needs. Freedom is misused to bless practices that splinter community. (We become) (o)bsessed with protecting our corner. Christ’s gift of freedom is different. Freedom from fear, sin, death, and oppression moves us toward the sharing of fruit that builds community. Love of neighbor and the gift of freedom in Christ are so linked for Paul that they become one and the same.”

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” We are no longer enslaved to death and sin. We are no longer enslaved to religious practices that bind the spirit rather than liberate it. We are no longer enslaved to cultural norms, whether we are teenagers burdened by expectations of how to look and behave, or adults

burdened by expectations of money and career. We are no longer enslaved to practices – addictive practices, harmful practices, that keep us down. For freedom Christ has set us free.

And yet this is a different kind of freedom. Freedom that binds us to community. Freedom that binds us to one another. Freedom that binds us to service. Freedom that comes with it an ethical mandate for living in community, and, by extension, allowing the spirit to overflow into all the world.

And so we do not equate the freedom of our faith with cultural freedom, an anything goes way of life with no regard for community. At the same time, because of this freedom in Christ, there are ethical implications to how we live in the world, and how we live for others in the world.

Some of you will remember Norman Rockwell's paintings, "Four Freedoms," made in 1943 at the height of World War II – you, or your parents or grandparents, might have had them on dinner plates or a wall calendar. Do you remember what they were?

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of worship
- Freedom from want
- Freedom from fear

I am not enough of a constitutional scholar – in fact I am no constitutional scholar at all – but it seems clear that we are in a deep conflict right now regarding "freedom of worship," especially when there are competing understandings of what that looks like among people of faith, let alone beyond the faith traditions.

And as we live in moments of protest and counter-protest, when social media's grip on us is strong, what does "freedom of speech" look like?

And not to let Norman Rockwell set our agenda, but I have been thinking a great deal about what ***freedom from want and freedom from fear*** might look like, especially in light of our faith commitments, our freedom in Christ that binds us to one another and binds us to community.

What does freedom from fear mean in the face of an unending and escalating epidemic of gun violence, both the mass shootings we read about in places like Uvalde and Buffalo and the daily, weekly, unreported gun deaths in the neighborhoods of this city and so many? I am no constitutional scholar, as I have said, but easy access to assault rifles by young men does not feel like what the second amendment – a “well-regulated militia” – had in mind. What can we do, as people who know freedom in Christ, to respond?

I mentioned Juneteenth, and billowing Confederate flags, and the end of slavery. What does freedom from fear and freedom from want mean in the face of ongoing and pervasive structural racism? What can we do – as people who know freedom in Christ, or I as a white person who experiences privilege – to respond?

Rockwell didn't say it, but I will. Freedom to love. Or in the negative, freedom from the fear that by loving who you love, and marrying who you marry, you are somehow a criminal. There was a time, a long time, in this nation, when a Black person could not marry a White person – the Presbyterian church fought to change that. And we fought to change how culture and church understood that persons of the same gender could – in love and making covenantal promises – marry. In fact language in the Presbyterian Book of Order is language I proposed. This felt settled, in church and society. It feels less settled now.

What does freedom look like?

Rarely are there moments that we know will make the history books. This past Friday was one of them, as the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the findings of Roe vs. Wade. For the past several days, I have read again and again from women I know and love and care about words that express their deep dismay. I stand in solidarity with them, as faithfully as I can, as best I can. I affirm a woman's right to choose – prayerfully, in consultation with her doctor, her partner when appropriate, even her God. That felt settled as well. And now it isn't.

I agree with my church. I haven't always, but I do on this. We don't have things like canon law, but we do have well-considered policy statements, hard wrought over time. Here is what we have said...

In 1970, several years before Roe vs. Wade, we affirmed that “the artificial or induced termination of a pregnancy is a matter of careful ethical decision of the patient ...and therefore should not be restricted by law . . .”

In 2006, we said that “When an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, the issue is intensely personal, and may manifest itself in ways that do not reflect public rhetoric, or do not fit neatly into medical, legal or policy guidelines. Humans are empowered by the spirit prayerfully to make significant moral choices, including the choice to continue or end a pregnancy.”

In 2012 (our last statement, though my hunch is that this year’s General Assembly will say something on the matter), we affirmed “the integrity of individual conscience by affirming the ability of women and men to make good moral decisions in matters of reproductive health...(and that) (t)he state has a limited legitimate interest in regulating abortions and in restricting abortions and in restricting abortions in certain circumstances.”

There is more detail, of course. For freedom Christ has set us free, and that includes, I believe, the freedom for a woman to make a faithful, conscious, perhaps difficult choice, free from want and free from fear.

During the pandemic – remember the pandemic – I discovered the music of Nina Simone. You can look her up. She made famous a song that resonates with me right now: “I wish I knew how/It would feel to be free/I wish I could break/All the chains holdin' me.../”

The song goes on for many verses: “I wish I could share/All the love that's in my heart/Remove all the bars/That keep us apart/I wish you could know/What it means to be me/Then you'd see and agree/That every (one) should be free...” (It is worth your time to find a video on YouTube of Nina Simone performing this song live.)

The civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer famously said that “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” That is true for a straight white male. It is true for a third grader going to school in a small Texas town or an innocent shopper at a grocery store in Buffalo. It is true for Nina Simone and Fannie Lou Hamer and all for whom a Confederate flag remains a sinful, scandalous reminder. It is true for all who

love who they love and who want to marry who they want to marry. And it is true for a woman faced with a choice, a choice.

We who are in Christ know a vision of freedom. Our calling is to live into it for ourselves, to be unbound from whatever binds and enslaves us, and then commit and commit and re-commit the same for every beloved child for God, until all know what it's like to be free. Amen.