

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 3rd, 2016
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost: For Freedom's Sake, Part 2
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 66:10-16
Psalm 66:1-11
Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18
Luke 10:1-12, 16-20

Today we continue from where we left off last week. You may recall Paul instructing the Galatians to remain spiritually free by living what I call a “post-law” life. Living a “post-law” life means making a paradigm shift. The Hebrew Law emphasizes obedience. Christianity emphasizes love. Law is about duty. Christianity is about relationship. Law has limits. Love knows no bounds. Don't get me wrong; it would be entirely inaccurate to say that Jews don't love Yaweh. Of course they do. What I am pointing out is the different focus between how God revealed himself during the time of the Old Testament and the New. As you can see, Christianity represents a shift from the lesser to the greater, like going from servant to friend. It is also scary, because it also represents full commitment. A servant won't be asked to risk everything for his master, but a friend might. Remaining spiritually free also requires keeping competing tendencies at bay. We neither obey God to earn our salvation, nor do we throw off all restrictions to live a libertine life.

A quick reading of today's epistle gives the impression that Paul is simply rattling off some unconnected, last-minute instructions before finishing the letter and handing it to a messenger. That's doing an injustice to this passage because there is so much more here than that. Paul is continuing to weave together his theological truths and practical applications that have been like simultaneous subplots running throughout his letter to the Galatian church. Here we find competing themes of personal responsibility alongside caring for others. We see again references to the struggle against the sinful nature, as well as the struggle against the Judaizers.

We also find something new: what Paul calls "the law of Christ." This is a phrase we don't find anywhere else from Paul, in fact, the closest we get is in Romans 8:2 where he refers to "the law of the Spirit." So it's fair to ask *what, exactly, is this law of Christ?* If you were here last week, then I'm sure you know the answer. Paul wrote in verse 14 of the previous chapter that love fulfills the Law. So, the law of Christ is to love. Paul knows he is doing something ironic here. He just emphatically told us in chapter 5 to ignore the Judaizers, and even referred to the Law of Moses as a *yoke of slavery*. Those are pretty harsh words! And yet, here

he is, telling us to fulfill the law of Christ. This statement doesn't undo anything that he said earlier; it is merely a way of getting our attention to remind us that we aren't free to give in to our sinful natures simply because we are justified through faith. In fact, verses one through ten are filled with imperative statements (five to be exact) giving specific instructions to his readers, yet still intertwined with doctrinal truths. And just in case there was any doubt that the "law of Christ" means "love," just look at what describes it earlier in verse two: sharing each other's troubles and problems. Is that not a perfect description of what love looks like?

We don't have time today to unpack all of Paul's remaining instructions in Galatians 6, but we do need to unwrap the next few verses a little better. If you are like me, an initial reading of verses three and four left you scratching your head. "You are really a nobody"? "[E]njoy the personal satisfaction of having done your work well"? These are odd statements coming from Scripture.

Keeping in mind that these verses follow out of verse two in a continuous thought helps provide some context. This is one of those cases where the original Greek will provide some enlightenment. Verse three literally says, "For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deludes himself." The implication here, in

light of the two preceding verses, is that someone who thinks too highly of himself feels too self-important to help a brother in need. The New Living Translation that we have before us makes that implication plain. It is also likely that someone who feels puffed up regarding their degree of holiness or obedience, can't sympathize with "less mature" Christians. I struggle to call them "less mature" Christians, because someone who thinks too highly of himself clearly has pride issues, which is one of the most deadly of sins. I have heard it said that pride is "God repellent." I fully agree. I also want to make clear the strong language Paul is using here. When he says that someone who thinks too highly of himself is deluding himself, he really means he is **delusional**, and is doing it to himself. To put it into the King's English, this person is nuts.

But we need to be careful here, because nobody is really a "nobody." We are all children of the living God, King of the universe. In fact, as beings with eternal souls, enabled to reproduce other beings with eternal souls, we have the highest of value, which cannot be quantified like just about everything else in terms of dollars. It's only when we think of ourselves too highly in comparison with others, that there is a problem. I struggle to imagine pride that is not comparative. It's probably what modern psychology calls "self-esteem," which is having a healthy

sense of self-worth. We need self-esteem in order to function. Ideally, self-esteem is not based on comparison with others, and as such, isn't a sin; but it is so easy for us as sinful creatures to take self-esteem and turn it into pride through comparisons.

This is the theme that carries us into verse four. This is a rare place where I feel our translation doesn't do justice to the original Greek, which says, "But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another." Paul is not only cautioning against comparisons, which are always flawed, but also instructing his readers to do a self-evaluation. The implication is that by examining our own behavior, we will find things to be proud of (leading to self-esteem), but he leaves out that an honest evaluation will just as surely reveal weak areas. He doesn't have to say it, because anyone who is led by the Spirit in doing a searching self-examination, will certainly focus on the areas that need to change, moreso than on the areas that are doing fine.

Paul seems to be advocating boasting in our good deeds, as long as it isn't based on a comparison with others. This gets back to my concept of self-esteem, which

is ideally a pride that isn't comparative. I think we can safely say, however, that Paul isn't really advocating boasting of any kind, "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." At least that is all he says he will ever boast about, down in verse 14. Which, when put together, reminds us that even if we have good deeds to boast about, they are really just things that the Holy Spirit equipped us to do, and good works that Christ planned for us. Keeping this in mind, how could anyone really boast about what they have done?

Looking back at the ground we have covered in the text so far, we see a strong emphasis on being holy in community. We are to help and encourage each other because no one can walk this journey alone. And yet verse four starts a shift towards self-responsibility regarding our spiritual life. Then comes verse five, which is short, to the point, and frankly a little jarring. "For we are each responsible for our own conduct." Paul has been talking about taking care of others, and now he tells us to take care of ourselves. Is this not contradictory? If we are all accountable before God for our own behavior, then why help anyone else? Like most theological truths, there are two sides to this coin: faith and obedience, free will and God's sovereignty, community and self. We are saved as individuals: no one's faith can save another person. However, we definitely set

the right conditions, encourage, and instruct others, so that they will have every opportunity to accept Christ. Those of us who are parents feel this most keenly. How we would love to guarantee our children's salvation; but we simply cannot. We do all that we can do, but ultimately, it is their decision whether or not to heed the call.

I think it appropriate that tomorrow we celebrate our freedom as a nation. July 4th is a favorite holiday for many, involving food, family, and *explosives*! It is good to celebrate our freedom from tyranny. But that is just our political freedom. How much more should we celebrate our spiritual freedom? We are not doomed to eternal judgment. Because of what Christ has done, we can live forever! In fact, that eternity has already begun. In a few minutes, we will pray the prayer of confession, petition, and thanksgiving, and in it we will say that Christ empowers us to "be freed *in this life* from the bondage of sin and death." We should be living out our spiritual freedom right now, and thanking God, and celebrating this freedom. And that is what we are doing when we share in the eucharist. It is a celebration of the sacrifice that Christ made to free us from the bondage of sin and death. It may not involve any fireworks, but here there is both family, and

food, as well as the greatest reason to celebrate. So come, let us celebrate together.