



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Freed to Serve**

A Sermon Preached by Ann R. Pettit

July 4, 2010

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

**Galatians 5:1; 13-25**

## **Galatians 5:1; 13-25**

*For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.*

The Fourth of July weekend affords us the opportunity to reflect on the history of the birth of our nation, and the independence which this holiday weekend lifts up. At points during the last several days we might have heard or will hear or read portions of the Declaration of Independence:

*When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...*

One of the many significant things about these words, signed into the declaration so familiar and honored in our nations nearly 225 years ago, is that the freedom from these political bands was yet to be realized. Political freedom wouldn't become official until 1783 when the Revolutionary War officially ended. And even in 1783, freedom wasn't available to everybody; slavery was still part of the fabric of society; women were more akin to property than partners; children were at the mercy of environments good and bad.

Freedom was declared on this date in 1776, but as a nation we continued and *continue* to grow into what freedom means and what it doesn't mean. It appears that freedom is not so simple or easy to work out as it might seem.

As parents watching three teenagers grow into adulthood, Patrick and I have become intimately familiar with this reality in a different context. Years of diaper changing, interrupted sleep, tantrums and bedtime struggles begin to seem like the 'good old days,' as we try to help our children make decisions about relationships, driving, colleges and living arrangements. Imparting our wisdom sometimes - or more likely *often* - gained through our own hard experiences, is not so easy. Our kids are exploring degrees of freedom which they want to enjoy - yet the consequences of this freedom are not always so easy to work out.

For example, the other day my husband brought home a car he wanted me to see and ride in - a car he's hoping to buy, to replace a car we hope to sell. My son, who will be moving into an apartment in just a little over a month immediately asked: "can I have it?" We immediately said, "No." But when he heard the price, he quickly calculated and declared it was affordable for him. The car is indeed within his reach for the purchase. Yet, as we explained to him, the purchase price is just the first consideration. The cost of insurance and fuel is ongoing. And, since the car has

seen many years, the cost of maintenance will be a significant and regular expense as well. "But I'll have a job," he persisted. "This is true," we insisted. However, "you don't want to become a slave to your car when the kind of transportation you'll need is readily available in other forms."

For Connall, owning a car means the freedom to go and do what he wants, when he wants; we're trying to help him understand the freedom he has to make choices such as this in the context of responsibility and reality. No matter what our age, freedom is indeed, a continuing process of growth and discovery. A discussion about the nature of freedom is at the heart of this letter to the Galatians. Still in the early days of the church's existence, they are trying to sort out what it means to *be* the church. Paul wrote this letter after visiting and ministering to them. His missionary journey took him on to other congregations but after he left, his credibility was disputed as others stepped in, preaching a gospel that challenged Paul's authority. And not only that, these false teachers were giving people instructions about becoming Christians that required them to fulfill certain portions of the law first. He wrote this letter to remind the faithful in Galatia of what he had taught, and of the nature of the freedom they experienced in Christ.

The opening statement in this passage is packed with meaning:

*"For Freedom Christ has Set us Free!"*

It is a brief but emboldening sentence which we can imagine being read at a gathering of the church. Perhaps it was a worship service and one of the leaders in the church who continued to respect and follow Paul's instructions had asked to read this letter from 'brother Paul.' Paul laid out his case in the first four chapters describing his personal credentials, offering historical allegories and some chastisement to boot. And then he comes at them with this simple yet fully loaded statement that was intended to undercut the message of works and requirements the people had been getting through other teachers.

*"For Freedom Christ has Set us Free!"*

Paul made it clear that their faith and Christ's love for them was not dependent on any ritual or religious rite they could fulfill. Jesus had done the work, and they were now free to respond out of thankfulness.

It's not hard to see why Paul would be upset by this teaching. The gift of God's grace is just that – a gift. Any teaching that put the burden back onto the people to *earn* grace was dangerous and a slippery slope from there; if earned, grace must be deserved, and if deserved, life becomes a veritable buffet of self-serving choices.

We can see this thinking at work in our lives. Advertisements that tell us: 'we've worked hard and deserve to indulge;' or 'we've settled for less long enough – now it's time for the good life.' In many different ways the message that we deserve, we've earned, we're better than, we're ready for 'that good thing' comes our way. Even the most faithful and discerning among us will be tempted from time to time and led to these waters to drink. Good advertising, after all, finds its way into the places in our hearts that we might not even know are there, grabbing our attention, and more importantly, our loyalty with it.

Paul's message is clear: Jesus wasn't crucified so that we would continue to be slaves to a set of rules AND Jesus also wasn't crucified so that we would be slaves to our own passions and desires. Christ died so that we could and would reflect what we believe to be right and true in a life giving way. Frederick Buechner wrote:

*"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world's deep hunger meet."*

It's a familiar quote perhaps, and it is familiar precisely because it describes the nature of call so well. When we speak about call, we speak of those things in our lives which God has uniquely gifted us to engage; those places where freedom is a response to Christ's gift and takes shape in our hearts, hands and feet as we serve one another faithfully. Paul warned the Galatians to use their freedom well, guarding against that which would lead them away from community life. Those fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are the gifts which lead us toward healthy relationships with one another and with the creation which God created and called, 'Good.'

At Massanutten this fruit shows forth in many, many different places, as individuals and teams of volunteers exercise their freedom in a way that gives life to them and brings joy to others:

The Faith Village Writing Team gathers around the passage of Scripture that will be the foundation for a series of lessons for our children; ideas begin to emerge and take shape as they imagine the passage coming alive through art or music, drama and storytelling;

A team of Food Pantry volunteers faithfully gather to purchase and sort food, stock the shelves, talk with clients and provide generous bags of food and personal items to make the life of a family a bit easier;

A project from our Visioning Process begins to become real in the shape of Parking Lot changes leading to a kinder and more accessible space;

A Mission Team returns from their work with new friendships formed and deep compassion for neighbors far from Penn Laird;

A group of men or women commit to gather together for prayer week after week

and form deep and lasting friendships;  
Volunteers step forward to lead a Sunday School class or cook supper each week for WOW or work with our youth;  
The Nominating Committee invites men and women to consider a call to serve as elders and deacons – and that call is answered, joyfully;  
Volunteers come to answer phones, fold newsletters, open and close the church each week;  
Members of the church provide warmth, food and fellowship to men and women who would have no such things were it not for the HARTS ministry;

I've named just a few things that I've seen bring energy and life to those who serve in these ways – there are many others as well. But the life giving power of Christ's gift is always calling us into new ministries of grace. We have been freed to live not for ourselves, but for Christ who calls us into service. The question we each must ask ourselves is: *what gives us life?* Where does meaning emerge as we live and work in the various communities we find ourselves each day? How is God's gift of grace prompting us toward a joyful response?

*Let us pray,  
O God, help us to answer these questions in our lives; lead us as we both enjoy the freedom won for us through Christ and respond through the gifts you have given. Amen.*