

“Freedom with Fruit” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
June 30, 2019,
Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

July 4th will be celebrated on Thursday of this week. There'll be lots of fireworks on TV and on the streets of Cathedral City. Dogs will be scared by all the noise. The birds will be on edge. But most people will be happy!

We Americans love to celebrate the Fourth, Independence Day. For the most part, Americans are proud of their country and want to let the world know of the freedoms we have in this country. Most of us can quote the Declaration of Independence when it speaks of certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. For the most part, we enjoy freedoms in this country that are not enjoyed by people in many other countries. Economic, political, religious, personal, and communal freedoms typify our way of life in the USA.

What does it mean to have freedom – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? From reading and listening to the media today, the definition of freedom varies from person to person and from group to group. Americans tend to think of freedoms as personal. I have the right to be left alone to pursue my happiness – happiness on my terms. Unfortunately, many folks have little concern for how their pursuit of happiness affects other folks.

We often hear what has become a familiar phrase – ‘not in my backyard.’ You’ve heard people say in an interview that was broadcast on TV, “It’s OK to provide housing for recovering drug addicts. Yes, we need one to help out these poor people, but just don’t put it in my backyard, my neighborhood, my city.” What seems to be missing is a concern for others and for the good of the whole.

In today’s scripture from Paul’s letter to the Galatian church, Paul talks about freedom: freedom in Christ. Paul states: **For freedom Christ has set us free.** Paul literally means that Christ’s life, death and resurrection has set us free. Free. Free from what? What has Christ set us free to do? To pursue life, liberty and happiness? Some Christians may think so. But is that really what Paul is talking about here? How does the freedom Paul writes about compare to freedom as most people define and practice it here in the USA?

What does Paul tell us about the freedom Christ-followers enjoy? Paul writes: **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.** Slave to one another? What? Some of you may be saying, “Did I sign on for this when I became a Christ-follower?” My answer. Yes, you did!

As Christ followers, we have freedom to gather together for the benefit of others – so we can feed food-deficient families. We have the freedom to love and care for each other – as many of you do when you care for each other in this church. We have the freedom to serve people in our community – as we are doing with the cooling center. As Christ-followers, Paul is telling us we are free to be slaves to one another. To say that another way, we are free to serve one another, to be concerned about ‘others’ in our community who need help. We have freedom to love and care for each other. We are free in Christ!

That doesn't sound like the freedoms some folks will be celebrating on the Fourth of July! Just keep in mind that Christ didn't live a life centered on himself. He didn't want to keep in their place those thought of as 'less desirable,' those the Bible calls unclean. Jesus waded right into situations others avoided! He didn't claim any status as the Son of God. Christ was a servant to all. Christ showed us how to be free – free to serve.

Freedom is not the absence of encumbrances as some folks may think. Too often the lack of concern for others can lead to excesses that hurt others, to self-indulgent, to the misuse of the freedom.

Freedom to worship becomes ... idolatry.
Freedom to discuss becomes ... quarrels.
Freedom to disagree becomes ... dissension.
Freedom to thrive becomes ... envy.

In the USA, the personal and political freedom we celebrate on July 4th comes with responsibility. To be a good citizen, to participate in our democracy, we need to vote, pay taxes, obey the laws, respect property and keep the peace. To enjoy the freedom that Christ provides, Paul only mentions one single demand, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** Where have we heard that before? Right from Jesus Christ's mouth. Jesus said, **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”** (Mark 12:30-31)

What is important to those of this world? Money, power, time? Do we as individuals worry about having a short supply of one or more of these? Are we inclined to keep for our own use what we think is scarce rather than sharing with others? In the USA today, we seem to fight over what we consider limited resources. There's not enough money to pay for this or that. If I pay too much in taxes, will I have enough for me? If I give money to the poor will there be enough money left over for me? What is it that you don't want to share with others?

What does Paul list as important? Certainly not money, power, and time! Paul lists: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** Just stop and think for a moment. Are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in short supply? For some people, they may be because they are so concerned about their limited resources. But there is no limit on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – unless we put that limit on them.

It's interesting to me that Paul calls love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control Fruits of the Spirit. What an apt description. The Holy Spirit gives us these gifts and it is our responsibility to work with the Spirit to develop them – to produce fruit.

Do farmers cause fruit to grow? No, they plant the seeds and let God's good creation take over as they watch the fruit grow and ripen. Sun, water, and heat are all necessary. Once the fruit matures, then the farmer collects what the earth produces.

If we are to develop the Fruits of the Spirit as Paul describes, we cannot will them to happen in our lives. We often would like the Fruits of the Spirit to appear instantaneously in our lives. We may want to become more joy-filled or generous people – right now!. Instead, receiving

the Fruit of the Spirit requires us to become more like the farmers, patiently working the soil of our lives to make the conditions right for the fruits of joy and generosity to grow within us.

As a farmer waters the plants, we need to include times of spiritual refreshment like worship, Scripture reading and prayer in our lives. Farmers prune, weed and treat pests. Likewise, we need to remove from our lives anything that is counter-productive to our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ. Like a farmer works the soil, we, too, need to get our hands dirty by serving our neighbors and friends.

In the movie *Evan Almighty*, God calls newly elected congressman Evan Baxter (played by Steve Carell) to build an ark in his suburban neighborhood. When Evan's wife Joan (Lauren Graham) becomes understandably confused and shaken by the odd behavior of her husband, she decides to take some time away to sort it out.

On her way out of town, she and their children stop at a restaurant where God (Morgan Freeman) serves as their waiter. His nametag reads "Al Mighty."

When the children are away from the table, the waiter/God engages Joan in conversation. He has noticed that she is troubled and asks if she is okay. She tells him about her husband and his ark, and asks for advice. What should she do with the challenge she has received of a husband who seems at least slightly crazy?

The waiter/God offers this beautiful thought. "If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does God give them the opportunity to be patient?"

The waiter continues, "If someone asked for their family to be closer," which is Joan's prayer throughout the movie, "do you think God zaps them with warm, fuzzy feelings? Or does God give them opportunities to love each other?"

While we would like the Fruit of the Spirit to suddenly and miraculously appear in our lives, it doesn't work that way. To borrow the phrasing of the movie, these fruits aren't zapped into our lives. Rather, we are given the opportunity to allow them to grow within us. When we participate in the process, cultivating spiritual fruit by planting, watering, pruning, weeding and waiting, we make room for God to do wonderful work within us. (Homiletics Online, *Jesus Fruit*, June 26, 2016)

As we produce that fruit, what does the Holy Spirit use it for? To exercise our freedom in Christ! To serve others with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Just consider for a moment. What gives you fulfillment, a sense of satisfaction? What is more important to you? Watching the stock market go up or spending time with your grandchild? Buying a new car or helping the church pack food bags for distribution to hungry families? In short, the Spirit uses the Fruits of the Spirit to enable each of us to love your neighbor as yourself – to serve each other in whatever way we can with whatever resources we have.

How is the Holy Spirit working in your life? Think about how you are working with the Spirit to produce the fruits that God has planted in you.

May God bless your every effort!