The Fruit of Freedom

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Micah 6:8; Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Today, we're culminating our 3-week sermon series on Galatians. Last week, Layne wrestled with the very challenging 4th chapter of Galatians, inviting each of us to do our own wrestling with God and with God's word, as we discover God's intentions and paths for our lives. That brings us today to chapter 5, where right away in verse 1, we are given the thundering mantra for the entire book of Galatians, and I would suggest, for the Christian life: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm, therefore, in your life. Stand in your freedom, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery, of intimidation, of legalism, of fear.

The God of the Bible, Paul wants us to know, is opposed to bondage and oppression of every kind. Whenever we experience ourselves or other people in circumstances where there is suffocation, where there is strangulation, where there is coercion, intimidation, or violent tyranny, we can know that the Spirit is deeply at work precisely there to release people from whatever is binding them. 5:1 is a verse that strikes fear in the heart of every tyrant. (Come to think of it, "5:1" would be a pretty good tattoo to get on your arm.) 5:1 strikes fear in the heart of every tyrant who wants to control other people and use other people for their own purposes. The words "freedom" and "liberation" are precious, life-giving words, words that send energy into the bloodstreams of individual people and entire communities. "Freedom" and "liberation" are precious words for biblical faith, and they are precious words in our country, where freedom rings from shore to shore.

There is considerable overlap between the ways that our society understands freedom, and the way that Scripture speaks of freedom. And that overlap creates a wide field for conversations and dialogues between the church and the wider society about freedom. The church's use of the word 'freedom' and the society's use of the word 'freedom' have overlap. But they are not exactly the same.

Society commonly understands freedom to refer to *autonomy*, to "do your own thing," what we might think of as 'freedom from' something. There is good meaning in this use of the word. Freedom from Pharaoh. Freedom from sin, freedom from fear, freedom from authoritarian control.

But autonomy has severe limitations for our understanding of freedom, chief among them that it is tempting to understand this to be about "my" freedom. There can be a deep temptation to think that as long as I've got my freedom, that's what really matters. Your freedom may not be as much of my concern. When you break the word 'autonomy' down into its two parts – *auto* and *nomos* – we can see that it literally means "self-law." And this can mean that when we try to live lives of autonomy, we are going to be at the mercy of ourselves. In the face of the uncertainties of life, our small selves are too self-absorbed and too full of anxiety, so that the autonomous self ends up being anything but free.

The freedom that Paul describes here, the freedom into which we have been delivered is 'freedom in Christ,' a freedom which is not the autonomous freedom of society, but the joyful freedom of the children of God. It is not just "freedom from" something, it is "freedom for" something; we have been set free to live for our neighbor, we have been set free for lives of compassion. In just a moment, we're going to hear from David Jessee about how serving as a Deacon/Stephen Minister is one way to live out this other-serving freedom in Christ. This is the freedom of belonging to Christ, and thus being completely secure in the midst of the storms of life; it is the freedom of living in Christ, where we do not have to figure everything out for ourselves, but where Christ lives with us and in us and through us; it is the freedom of being part of the global fellowship of the church, a worldwide movement seeking to bring about justice, holiness, reconciliation, dignity, and mercy in the midst of our world of desolation, violence, resentment, and fear. The church does not try to avoid painful situations like Memphis where the city is coming to terms with Tyre Nichols' death at the hands of the police; the church is present in painful situations like Memphis, looking to bring about understanding and justice and peacefulness and accountability and right relationships. The church lives by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, as the prophet Micah instructed us. That is freedom in Christ. Not the foolish pursuit of autonomy, where I can do whatever I want, and you can't tell me otherwise. That's not freedom. That's foolishness.

Galatians 5 demonstrates an interesting implication of our freedom in Christ, which has to do with being *scattered and distracted* or being *gathered and integrated*. There's a very instructive grammatical lesson in verses 16-25. In these verses, Paul is contrasting two ways of living, which he describes as living by the "flesh" and living by the "Spirit." Our sexually over-stimulated culture might assume that Paul's use of the word "flesh" is focusing issues of sensuality here, but we can see from the examples that he gives that what he has in mind is something closer to living by the self-indulgent ego. He talks about the "works of the flesh" as: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing…and "things like these." These are the "works" of the flesh. They are plural. When we live like this, our energy and our attention and

our hearts will be scattered and dispersed in all kinds of directions. We will live fragmented lives.

By contrast, he says in verse 22, the "fruit of the Spirit" is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and – with what might just be the capstone for these - self-control. For a long time, I thought these were the fruits of the Spirit. But they are the "fruit" of the Spirit. Although Paul lists nine of them, they are singular. When we live by the Spirit, we will find that our hearts are not scattered. We are gathered. We are integrated. We are established. We are grounded.

Freedom in Christ does not become diffuse or scattered; freedom in Christ is integrated and gathered. I find that that's a very useful way for me to get a sense, at any given moment, of whether I am living a life of Christian freedom. Do I feel scattered? Is my energy and attention running all over the place? Am I getting easily distracted? Or am I steady and serene and coherent? And in case it's not clear, we're not talking about putting on an act of looking steady and serene, but about being that way from the inside out. Some of us can be a little bit like ducks, who look like we're just gliding along on the surface, meanwhile we are frantically paddling underneath.

For freedom Christ has set us free; do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Freedom in Christ is available to you today. You do not need to wait until some point in the distant future to live the gathered, integrated life in the Spirit. The church is the community of people, this broken and gathered community of people, who are practicing Christian freedom together. We will not get it right every time. We will trip over ourselves in all kinds of ways. But the church is a community where we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God, inside the church and out in the world. To God and to God alone, be all glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen.