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Last week I mentioned in my sermon about a conversation I had with my children when they were youngsters, when the rules of school and the rules of parents were weighing on them, and said, "I can't WAIT until I'm grown up and can do whatever I want!!!" And my rejoinder was something like, "You actually think I get to do what I want?????" No, I didn't have teachers telling me things, and my mom only still told me things in my head, and couldn't technically ground me anymore. So in their terms, I was FREE and could do whatever I wanted. My experience, though, was that I had a boss telling me how to be and what to do, sometimes in unreasonable ways; I had a clock to punch and deadlines to meet; I had all the things planted in my head from all kinds of sources - expectations of how the house should look, how I should parent, how I should act, how I should do this and that and the other. My profession had expectations on me, people in the community had expectations about my yard being mowed and pretty, schools put expectations on how I raised my kids and did homework with them, my spouse had expectations for me; then there are all the rules to follow for getting your insurance reimbursement, for doing your taxes, being a responsible citizen, looking good, minding your health, keeping the car running, being a homeowner, etc etc etc forever! Some of those authorities might have been inner voices, but some do have the power to punish me if I don't follow the rules. I didn't FEEL very free - I felt like lots of my life was proscribed, and full of responsibility.

We Americans talk a lot about freedom, especially as the 4th of July rolls around, or an election, or other political event. We mean a lot of different things by it. Mostly we mean things like being free to vote for our own leaders; free to own property; free to pursue careers or start businesses we're interested in or make plans for going in a direction we want. I'm not so sure anyone could grow up to be president any more - it seems to take a lot of money and certain connections - not everyone starts on a level playing field anymore - if they, in fact, ever did. But some people WILL have the experience of things working out in wondrous ways, rising from obscurity to fame or from poverty to

riches. Most of us, though, will make our way as far as the scope of our economic class, our health and our access to education will allow us.

Our forbears shaped our national ethos to value both care for all people, as well as a capitalistic approach to providing them - - which sometimes conflict with each other - but has worked moderately well so far. Our forbears shaped national infrastructures for transportation, food and water, sanitation and things like we study in civic and government classes, or what we used to call Social Studies. And many have had better lives because of it all. Along the way, however, in order to get these benefits, we've agreed to forgo certain other freedoms - like the freedom to keep all our money, the freedom to riot in the street, the freedom to go through whatever intersection we feel like without stopping; and we obey certain societal rules for common life. So our freedom to do what we want has some boundaries.

The apostle Paul, however, isn't talking about political freedom at all when he writes in Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set you free;" nor is he talking about political slavery when he says, "do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Rather, Paul's talking about our spiritual life, and it really has nothing to do with our national holiday at all. We need to adjust our ears to hear Paul - and God's words through him - in terms of Paul's big concern for our spiritual growth, reflecting God's big concern for us to live rightly in GOD'S creation, GOD'S community, GOD'S kingdom. The metaphor of freedom versus slavery in this passage is about our spiritual life, what we give ourselves to, what rules us from the inside of our soul. Despite the fact that some preachers will use these verses to rant about their view of America next week, these words are actually written to ALL who would follow the words of Christ in ANY and EVERY country in the world, because God's kingdom doesn't have any geographic or political boundaries - God's kingdom extends everywhere.

Another picturesque metaphor Paul uses in this passage calls this slave-to-sin life, "living according to the flesh" and counters that with calling the freedom-in-Christ life, "living in the spirit." He's not setting up a dualistic worldview here, saying anything material and fleshly is bad, and that only the pure, unbodied spirit is good. People who haven't read deep enough into his thinking have taken these words in an artificial way and made it seem really religious to divide between dirty, common, yucky physical things and the lovely, pure and perfect existence of spirit, as if that existed without any physical

reality. That's more in line with ancient Greek thought than Jewish/Christian thought, ie Biblical thought. Unfortunately, many of our forbears bought into that, with the result that our religious history abounds in stories of extreme ascetic practices, horrific discipline practices, a view of women as lesser because they are so involved with physical things – even to the point that one theologian wondered if we even had souls; and an overall disregard for the bodily life of us as human.

Rather, Paul is reaching to explain what he understands as the difference believing in Christ makes in our spiritual and physical living. He uses the word translated as “flesh” in our Bibles to mean the whole self still under the power of sin – other places he uses the terms the “old man” and the “first Adam.” When he writes about the opposite of “flesh” as “spirit,” he means the whole life when its lived by God’s understanding. We might talk about finding our higher self, meaning that part of us that can rise above our more base, ego-centric, selfish, or reactive parts. We might talk about becoming conscious of our own issues that sometimes control us and drive us where we don’t really want to go; our addictions; our negative or self-defeating behaviors. If we were in counseling, we might talk about “old tapes” that run in our heads, or learned behaviors, or complexes that take us over.

See, we understand a difference between a person who is still controlled by reactive, unexamined and unreflective ways – and a person who things about things, thinks about ultimate goals, and is working to learn to act from a place of more wisdom. Take that kind of understanding and put it in context of learning to live in faith, guided by God’s point of view, God’s understanding of creation and people and community and love – versus the life of someone who really couldn’t care less what God might think, whoever God is, and is mainly out for self-indulgence, fighting, getting what they want at any cost to others, making money even through scams and tricks that hurt people – what the Bible calls things that make for death versus things that make for life. Old life, new life; 1st Adam, new Adam; unredeemed, redeemed – reborn, saved, born again – flesh / spirit; slave / free - all are phrases the Bible writers use to try and express the new creation we can be in Christ Jesus. Its not an ego-strength thing, its not a counseling thing, its not a freed-from-my-body thing either. It’s a spiritual new birth. An early Christian writer I like calls it having a

“breakthrough” – others may use the word “awakening”. Paul just happens to use “flesh” and “spirit” to try and measure one against the other.

Look at his list of “fleshly” behaviors – only a couple are the salacious things like fornication, licentiousness (lewdness), carousing, drunkenness. A couple seem to reflect a false spirituality, like idolatry and sorcery. But look at the rest of the list – these are wrong-headed relationships between people that have nothing to do with physical bodies: *enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy*. They have to do with emotional and spiritual problems that hurt community.

Then look at his list of “fruit of the Spirit”: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. These signs of living in the redeemed, saved, forgiven, freed life of Christ have to do with makes for right relationships in our community, right living with the rest of creation, and above all, right living with God.

No matter which political nation believers are born in or live in, the true freedom of our souls is when we yield to Christ, which is a freedom that knows no boundaries on earth, and fulfills God’s call for creation. As we celebrate our national, political freedoms this coming week, we could still be enslaved in our inner being, unless we have turned to God and are learning to live into the vision Christ plants in our hearts. Our political freedoms certainly make a difference, a good difference, in the quality of our lives and accomplishments; the important freedom, however, is the one that sets our souls free from being held down in the self-centered life, so we are free to embrace Gods vision of service to neighbor and things that make for peace. AMEN.