

SERMON: The Boundaries of Freedom
TEXT: Galatians 5:13-25

So, the fireworks have already begun; no surprise here. Of all the things that cause controversy in our country, I never would have guessed that fireworks would be one of them. Personally, they don't bother me unless they go too late into the night, are too close to my home, or the vegetation is dry and flammable. But there are a lot of people who have serious issues with fireworks. I have a friend in the Springfield area who posted this appeal on Facebook last week:

Folks of Battlefield, Fireworks are allowed July 1st-6th. Please refrain from shooting off fireworks until then. I have a son with special needs, and someone just set off a huge firework that sounded like a bomb and now my son is panicked and having a meltdown. I take him out of town July 1-6 so he doesn't have to be around the noise. Please show respect for others that do not tolerate fireworks and wait until the designated dates. 6 days is more than enough time to set off fireworks. So please wait until then. Thank you.

She's probably much angrier than her words reveal. And I don't blame her. But she is a reasonable person. Understanding that the world does not revolve around her or her son, she makes adjustments as needed. I'm not sure where she

goes that doesn't have fireworks, but thank goodness she's able to do that. Many people can't just leave town.

This coming week, I know I'll see more and more comments on Facebook from people worried about family members with PTSD. Others will be worried about their dogs. More dogs go missing on the Fourth of July than any other day of the year.

Some people might argue that it's a free country, and they should be able to use fireworks whenever and wherever they want. If somebody else has a problem with it, too bad. Let them deal with it. After all, fireworks are the traditional way that we celebrate our freedom on Independence Day. But, like the town where my friend lives, many places have laws or ordinances limiting where and when fireworks can be used.

Living in a civilized society requires that there be boundaries on our freedoms. Without boundaries, we would devolve into complete anarchy. Furthermore, living a Christian life, freedom also has its boundaries.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul addresses the infighting happening among the young Christians there. You see, the early Christian church was made up of mostly Jews who recognized Jesus as the Messiah. But there were also non-Jews – Gentiles – among them. The Jews believed that the non-Jews ought to observe Jewish law in order to be a part of the group.

So Paul writes to them with a teaching on the issue of freedom. “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.” Then he points back to what Jesus said was the second greatest commandment. “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the bottom line of the law, the very purpose of the law. What’s important is the way we treat one another, not whether a man is circumcised or not.

I think our tendency when we hear the word, freedom, is to turn it inward, to think of it as something we possess. We think of ourselves and the freedoms we enjoy – or the freedoms that we lack. Of course, we try to remember that *freedom isn't free*, that the price was paid by those who sacrificed and fought and died to

give us our freedom. Such sacrifice must be honored and celebrated and never forgotten.

But “there’s not an American in this country free until every one of us is free.” These words were spoken by Jackie Robinson, the first person of color to play major league baseball. Just because he had broken the color barrier in professional sports didn’t mean he was free. He would still be discriminated against because of the color of his skin. Over seventy years later, he would still not be free. Why can’t we figure this out?

Freedom in Christ extends beyond our boundary lines of *my* family, *my* political party, *my* ethnicity, *my* religion, or *my* race. I cannot be free unless you are free. Freedom in Christ is a calling. It is missional. It is a result of our relationship with Christ, and it ought to be a feature of our relationships with one another.

I learned something I never knew before in my study of this passage. The word *religion* comes from a Latin word meaning, *to bind together*. Religion, by its very nature is to bring us together and hold us together. We can’t seem to figure this out either.

Paul tells us that we are to “live by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Now, this list he gives of the “obvious” works of the flesh can sound very antiquated to us, and if you’re like me, you read it faster just to get past it. Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

But one theologian explained that the word, “*flesh*, is often Paul’s shorthand for self-centered living as opposed to God-centered living. Thus, the counterpoint to life in the *flesh* is a life of loving service for the benefit of others; it is *faith working through love*. Love is the way that freedom in Christ expresses itself. Indeed, freedom in Christ makes radical loving service possible, which fulfills the will of God for human relationships.” (Robert A. Bryant, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3)

Freedom in Christ comes with a purpose. Radical loving service is the will of God for us. So, Paul gives us another list to counter those self-centered behaviors. A God-centered life, a life of freedom in Christ is marked by the fruit of the Spirit. Let’s read this one more slowly. “The fruit of the Spirit is Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Generosity. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control.”

These are THE BOUNDARIES OF FREEDOM, if you will.

A couple of weeks ago, I saw the documentary called, Emanuel. It is the story of the 2015 mass shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. You will remember that the shooter, a young white man, came into the church and sat in with a group of African Americans meeting for Bible Study and prayer. And then he started shooting. He killed nine people. Some of the survivors of that shooting and the family members of those murdered say that they forgive the young man.

Of course, it's not as easy as just saying the words. It is something that I'm sure they have to struggle with and strive for every day, and some days it's more difficult than others. But they forgive him. Not because of who he is. But because of who Jesus is and what Jesus taught. They were in Bible Study. They take seriously the word of the Lord and the teachings of Jesus. They remember that in his unfathomable pain he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Whether the shooter was in his right mind, whether he knows the difference between right and wrong, whether he claims to have known what he was doing

doesn't matter. When it comes to understanding God's will and God's ways, he clearly doesn't understand. But the people of Emanuel Church do understand.

They understand that because they are free in Christ, they are called to share that freedom in love. Because they are free in Christ, they are called to live by and produce the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Whether others accept it is not up to us.

Does their forgiveness mean that the shooter should go free? Of course not. He must be held accountable for his crime. But his victims refuse to be imprisoned by his hate. They will not act in hate just because he hated them. They will not act with violence just because he was violent toward them. They will remain people of love because Christ loves them.

THE BOUNDARIES OF FREEDOM are that if we claim it for ourselves, we must offer it to others in the fruit of the Spirit... to the glory of God!

AMEN.