

PREPOSITIONAL FREEDOM

Sermon, July 4, 2010

Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-26

Today we celebrate our nation's birth, that 4th of July in 1776, when our forbearers declared their independence ... their freedom *from* British rule. For the most part, we usually think of freedom in terms of the preposition "from." We are freed from subjugation, freed from taxation without representation, freed from unlawful search and seizure, free from the constraints of tyranny. But we are not just freed FROM. We are also freed FOR. We are freed FOR life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We are freed FOR the purposes of exercising our unalienable rights.

Yes, we celebrate our independence today, but we live not only with constitutionally defined freedoms but with constitutionally defined *limitations*. The constitution places our beloved freedoms within the context of certain limits ... for unlimited freedom can become as much a tyrant as any monarch or dictator. True freedom has its limits. We are not free to do whatever we please. Some things we pursue in our relentless pursuit of happiness can be more enslaving than the worst tyrant.

Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." That prepositional phrase "freed from" makes its way into our Christian vocabulary time and again ... we talk about being freed from sin, freed from guilt, freed from judgment, freed from fear. Jesus Christ and His sacrificial life have indeed freed us from all that and more, yes. Jesus has liberated us, given us the gift of freedom. But there were some in Galatia who thought being free in Christ meant being free to do anything they pleased. Like so many today, they were so taken with the preposition "from" that they could only equate freedom with complete independence and autonomy. They thought that true freedom meant having no constraints whatsoever, being absolutely autonomous and sovereign over our own lives. These people concluded that if Christ has set us free, we must be free for anything that strikes our fancy. Some were hearing in Paul's preaching permission to do anything their hearts desired. But there is no quicker way to become enslaved again ... becoming enslaved to passions, desires, addictions, destructive manners of life.

In fact, here Paul tells us freedom's call involves at least *six* prepositions: From, For, By, In, Out and To. We are freed *from* our self-indulgent pasts, freed *for* living free lives, freed *by* the power of the Holy Spirit, in divine constraints of living *in* Christ and *out* of His presence in us, and freed *to* serve one another in love.

Some of you may remember Michelangelo's philosophy of sculpture ... I mentioned this in a sermon seven years ago, and if you do recall that, I'm flattered. Simply put, Michelangelo's philosophy was that the final image, the final work of art, was already there inside the stone. The artist's job was to free that beautiful image from its stony prison, to release it, by removing everything that didn't belong there, chiseling away that which encumbered it. Well, Jesus shares Michelangelo's philosophy. The divine image of God in which we were created is there within us. He wants to free that image, free us *from* that which encumbers us, free us *for* the great purposes He has for us, free us *by* the power of His grace, free us *to* be who we were created to be. He wants us to be freed from all the stuff that just doesn't "belong" there, from all the burdens and weights that are encumbering the divine image created in us from the beginning. Free us from our slaveries, free us from our self-destructive and self-limiting habits and addictions, free us from chips on our shoulders that are actually boulders crushing our spirits, free us from all that which is keeping us from being who we were uniquely created to be. He wants to just chisel away all that stuff that doesn't belong there.

Jesus doesn't necessarily want to change us; He wants to fulfill us. As we really grow in our freedom in Jesus Christ, we find He doesn't necessarily change us into somebody altogether different; rather, He frees us to discover who we were meant to be all along. This new life He is working to develop within us is a purer form of ourselves. He is restoring the divine image of God in our lives; He develops within us the self we were created to be from the beginning. I've mentioned this before, but it bears repeating: It is a lot like being in love. One of the most profound pleasures of being genuinely in love is the freedom you find to be yourself. Sure, being in love changes you; among other things, it helps make you a lot more

responsible and level-headed as you try your best to please the beloved. But it's almost misleading to say that being in love changes you ... rather, it *fulfills* you, helping you to be a purer form of yourself.

On a related note, I heard a great and memorable quotation given during a "toast" at the wedding reception of Jennifer Morin and David Segala yesterday. The matron of honor, in toasting the couple, quoted that great American poet ... Dr. Suess. Dr. Suess (*in one of his more "adult" moments*) once wrote, "You know you are in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams."

Like a divine lover, like a divine sculptor, Jesus Christ wants to fashion in us a purer form of ourselves, the way God designed us to be all along. And as you grow to love Him more, the more you'll understand that He really wants you to be free. Free *from* the stuff that doesn't belong there in your lives. Freed *for* the purpose of being who you were created to be. Free *to* live life fully and abundantly. Freed *in* Jesus Christ to be productive, useful, fruitful, dependable. Free *to* make a real and significant difference in the world about you. And free *to* be a real blessing to those who love you and who depend on you.

Freedom is not easy. It takes a while to figure out how to be free; in fact, some never learn how. Being free doesn't mean being carefree. Sometimes it seems easier and more secure NOT to be free. There have been many moments in my adult life when I thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to be a child again and have someone else deal with the bills and the house repairs and figure out what's for dinner (!)." It *can* be comforting to have someone else in charge. Freedom is challenging, it's complicated, it's not easy. Learning how to live freely ... learning how to possess our freedom ... learning how to remain free in our freedom ... does not come automatically. Born free makes a wonderful title for a book or movie, but no living thing is actually born free. In fact, just about every living creature is born dependent. For us, dependency begins in our mother's womb, and then as we slowly grow we are dependent on the nurture of our parents. But the goal of parenting is to train up a child who can eventually leave home as a free adult, one who is free and capable of assuming adult responsibilities that are part and parcel of being free. Freedom is a skill learned over years of training and discipline, and trial and error, and accident and healing, all bathed with unconditional love. There is a purpose to all that parental loving and all that training. The purpose of all that loving and all that training by loving parents is not so that the child will think, "Hey, this home is the greatest place in the world and I'm never leaving." No, that is not what your parents were hoping for. No, their goal is that you could in fact leave the home as a person who would know how to possess your freedom, to use your freedom for good purposes.

In like manner, the reason Jesus has invited us to be His disciples and nurtured us with His love is not so that we would be good church people who stay huddled up here in the sanctuary in protective hiding from the world out there. He wants us to know how to live *in* the world without being *of* the world, so that we would be free. Free to live as Jesus lived. Free from the baggage the world keeps trying to lay upon you, free from the possessions that have taken possession over you, free from the habits and the warped desires that are just sucking away the humanity from your life, free of the guilt that just crushes you. Free to go out there and make a real difference in the world around you. Freed for the purpose of being a blessing to those you love and to those who are depending on you in life. Free to be who God created you to be from the beginning.

Like a loving parent, the Heavenly Father loves us! He is no King George seeking tyrannical rule over our lives; He wants us to live as a free people. That is why He wants you to be what you were created to be and that is a free human being. Free and fully human, a person who knows and practices what it takes to be free. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. You were called to be free! Don't use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature." Because that is a sure-fire way to become enslaved again.

Again, like a divine lover, like a divine sculptor, like a loving parent, our God wants us to be free. Free to be the way He designed us to be all along. Free to be who we were created to be. Free to live life fully and abundantly. Free to be productive, useful, fruitful, dependable; free to make a real, significant, positive and lasting difference in the world about us, free to serve one another in love.

Let us pray: O God, Your word is truth. Do sanctify us by the truth, and help us to know the truth, so that we may be truly free. Amen.