

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JULY 4, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 33)*

One: "The Lord frustrates the purposes of the nations."
All: "God keeps them from carrying out their plans."
One: "But the Lord's plans endure forever."
All: "God's purposes last eternally."
One: "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord..."
All: "...The people whom the Lord has chosen as a heritage."

***OPENING HYMN** "We Gather Together" GtG 336

One: We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
All: he chastens and hastens his will to make known;
One: the wicked oppressing now cease from distressing.
All: Sing praises to his name; he forgets not his own.

One: Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
ordaining, maintaining his kingdom divine;
All: so from the beginning the fight we were winning;
One: thou, Lord, wast at our side;
All: all glory be thine!

One: We all do extol thee, thou leader triumphant,
and pray that thou still our defender wilt be.
All: Let thy congregation escape tribulation;
One: thy name be ever praised!
All: O Lord, make us free! *(Public Domain)*

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

God our Father, you led people to this land, and, out of conflict, created in us a love of peace and liberty. We have failed you by neglecting rights and abdicating responsibilities. Forgive pride that overlooks national wrong, or justifies injustice. Forgive divisions caused by prejudice or greed. Have mercy, God, on the heart of this land. Make us compassionate, fair, and helpful to each other. Raise up in us a right heart, that sees this nation's good, and seeks your will for all; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*SILENT CONFESSION

*ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from I John 4)*

One: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.”

All: **So rejoice and believe the good news of God’s grace: that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, in Jesus Christ we are loved. Amen. Alleluia!**

*THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Romans 6:16-19
Galatians 5:1,13-14

NOTE: In both Romans 6 and Galatians 5, Paul uses the metaphor of ‘slavery’, a term problematic (at best) for us in our cultural and historical context.

With the help of various resources (including various translations), I have sought to avoid the term ‘slavery/slave’ while still remaining true to the scripture and Paul’s intent.

ROMANS 6:16-19 (original + Common English Bible)

¹⁶ Do you not know that the one to whom you yield yourself in complete obedience – you are bound to the one whom you obey, whether it be sin which results in death, or obedience which results in righteousness. ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that though you used to be bound to sin, you obeyed from the heart the teaching you received, ¹⁸ and having been freed from sin you became bound to righteousness. ¹⁹ (I am speaking with ordinary metaphors because of your natural limitations.) For just as you once yielded all the parts of your life, ensnared in impurity and lawlessness resulting in more wickedness, so now yield all the parts of your life, tied to righteousness resulting in good, holy lives.

GALATIANS 5:1,13-14 (various)

¹ For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. ... ¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but through love be bound to one another in service. ¹⁴ For the whole law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “The Blight of Freedom” by Pastor Bill Vincent

“We gather together to ask the Lord's blessings”: our first hymn for this morning. Let me share with you something of the back story of the hymn.

No one knows who the author of this hymn was, but we can trace it to the Netherlands in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The Dutch were praying for freedom from Spanish oppression.

This hymn was written to give thanks for the victory that was almost in sight. For these Dutch believers, "the wicked oppressing" were the Spaniards, who would "now cease from distressing." And there was no doubt that God should receive the glory for the victory.

(The One Year Book of Hymns, compiled and edited by Robert K. Brown and Mark R. Norton, devotions written by William J. Peterson and Randy Peterson; Tyndale, 1995; entry for September 1)

A story not unlike this country's own story in its founding some 245 years ago: a founding in the struggle for freedom.

"The land of the free" we celebrate on July 4th, remembering the bravery of those who signed the Declaration of Independence and those who fought to secure it. A celebration of freedom, with good reason.

How, then, might we call it a blight?

Freedom is good. But...there always has to be a qualifier – a very necessary qualifier – or else all you and I end up with is freedom gone awry.

You see, there is such a thing as too much freedom. Or the wrong kind of freedom. Or blind freedom. Or ill-defined freedom. Or ill-chosen freedom. Ill-directed freedom.

An episode of the comic strip “Blondie”:

(1st frame: Dagwood heads toward his favorite place -- the sofa.)

Oh boy, with everybody gone, it's the perfect time for a nice little nap.

(2nd frame: Dagwood is looking over his shoulder, startled, as a group of kids stands in front of the sofa, one of whom says,)

We want to see Mrs. Bumstead about those great cookies she makes.

(3rd frame: Dagwood speaks to the kids while still on the sofa, an angry look on his face, the kids surprised:)

Listen, you can't come traipsing in here anytime you want without ringing my doorbell!!

(4th frame: Dagwood shoos the kids out the door, even carrying two of them by the scruff of the neck, still with an angry look on his face, the kids sad:)

This isn't a cookie shop! This is a private home! Beat it!! All of you!!!

(5th frame: Dagwood is asleep on the sofa.)

Z-Z

(6th, and final, frame: Dagwood looks over his shoulder, startled, as the kids angrily confront him, pointing to another kid in adult dress-up clothes with a briefcase, glasses, and mustache:

[the first kid says,] **We brought our lawyer back with us this time!!**
[and a second kid says,] **Yeah, these are the nineties and we know our rights!!**

("Blondie" by Dean Young & Denis Lebrun - June 15, 1997)

And believe me, it need not simply be the nineties.

The blight of freedom: a perversity of individualism; the fever pitch of individual rights; the rampant disease of disregard for others in the name of protecting my rights, my freedoms.

And don't think this blight is new. I was reading a murder mystery written in 1929. And one of the characters – the police detective – had this to say:

"...We all know it's the fashion nowadays to disregard the laws that inconvenience you. `Personal liberty,' and all that stuff!..." (*Murder Yet to Come* by Isabel Briggs Myers)

Could just as easily have been written now as 92 years ago.

And Diana Ross, in a song from a number of years ago, once sang,

**And if living for myself is what I'm guilty of,
go on and sentence me,
I'll still be free.**

("It's My Turn")

Only problem is, she's wrong! No, she won't be free. And neither will you and I if "living for myself" is the path we choose.

We think of freedom and 'slavery' – being bound to, tied to, controlled by, obliged to another – as opposites. We think of freedom as good and bondage as bad. And in the history of this country, there is much to be said for the truth of that statement. And remember, Paul speaks out of the history of a people who had been enslaved in Egypt.

But – and hear me carefully – it depends upon what kind of freedom you mean; it depends upon to whom you are bound.

The freedom to do whatever you want, oblivious to the consequences and how it might affect others – that is more akin to bondage: entrapped, tied up in our own desires, our own whims, our own knee jerk reactions, our own selfish needs and desires of the moment.

Being bound to the God of love – who cares for us always and works for the best for us, who knows us better than we know ourselves, and knows what is best for us even though we don't – that is true freedom: freedom, and even encouragement, to be and become the best people we can be as God only knows how.

So Paul writes,

For just as you once yielded all the parts of your life, ensnared in impurity and lawlessness resulting in more wickedness, so now yield all the parts of your life, tied to righteousness resulting in good, holy lives.

Paul makes the case that there is only one of two ways to live: either we are bound to God – and therefore a servant of God, pledging allegiance to God and God alone – or not. And if not, we are bound to something else, be it our own whims and appetites; be it fear; be it money; be it even some noble ideal.

Paul's point is that being bound to anything other than God is, in the end, destructive and leads to death.

So, "**if living for myself is what I'm guilty of,**" then I'm not free, but ensnared in my own self-serving ways, and on the path to self-destruction.

But being tied to God is true freedom and leads to life – true life.

Robert Ward seeks to make the point by telling the story of a young calf with the whole world before it:

Alone, untamed

he roamed the range.

The calf was wild and felt that wild was free.

But in the shadows deep

the gift of life was cheap

and poison weeds grew on the hilly walls.

`Til sick and without hope,

near dead, until a rope

bound the wild calf to one who cares.

And thus it came to me,

In wildness I'm not free

but must be bound—without—within—to One who cares.

(“The Wild Calf” by Robert B. Ward; October 1987 issue of Alive!)

And Thomas H. Troeger, hymn writer, says it this way:

We are not free when we're confined

to every wish that sweeps the mind,

But [we are] free when freely we accept

The sacred bounds that must be kept.

(“God Marked a Line and Told the Sea,” 1986)

For freedom Christ has set us free.

Admittedly, Paul is speaking of a different kind of freedom than what we mean in our decidedly political, American context. He speaks of freedom within the parameters of God's intent for life.

At the same time, what he says about freedom (by being bound to God and God's way) has definite implications for the decisions we make and the actions we take in our particular American, political context. For the freedom Paul speaks of is a freedom from the bondage of personal self-interest and a freedom to concern for others: the claiming of a different allegiance, an allegiance not to the self but to God and God's vision of life and freedom for the world.

And so Paul continues:

only do not let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses,

but through love be bound to one another in service.

Remember he speaks in the context of community: the understanding that we are created for each other; that God's intention is for us to be in community, in relationship with each other. The chosen people of God called into community, the community of the church.

And the moment you speak of community, you limit your freedom.

Even secular political philosophy acknowledges the give and take necessary for society to survive, to thrive. So political philosophy speaks of the social contract, what is fair for all involved.

We, from a Christian context, speak of community and love and service.

So Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth,

"We are allowed to do anything," so they say. That is true, but not everything is good. "We are allowed to do anything" – but not everything is helpful. No one should be looking out for his or her own interests, but for the interests of others. (I Corinthians 10:23-24 TEV)

And if this sounds familiar, remember what Jesus himself said:

So Jesus called them all together to him and said, "You know that people who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. Those of you who want to be great must be the servant of the rest; and those of you who want to be first must be the servan] of all. For the Son of Humankind came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45 TEV & NRSV)

Once again, Jesus hits the nail on the head, for the blight of freedom – the preponderance and extreme over-emphasis on individual rights and liberties and freedom to the exclusion of others – is indeed a sinful, self-interested expression of the desire "to be served" when instead you and I are called to the self-less decision "to serve."

As Paul says it,

through love be bound to one another in service.

This way of life of which Paul writes and Jesus speaks is a way of servanthood, yet also in truth freedom, and true life. And this way of servanthood informs us and our actions as we speak and seek to live out that other kind of freedom of which we first think with "the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air."

But let us be clear: the way of life of which Paul and Jesus speak goes beyond the simple freedom to choose to the freedom to risk. Freedom not from responsibility, but freedom with responsibility:

- freedom for others;
- freedom for and in community, which assumes certain limits to one's own freedom;
- freedom to love and help others, even the unpopular;
- freedom to love and befriend even the outcast.

This call to freedom involves sacrifice, yes, but not necessarily always for country, per se. But sacrifice for God and God's vision of life. Sacrifice for those others who are also children of God, whether they live across the tracks or across the country or across the sea. Sacrifice for the sake of neighbor, near and far. All because of the sacrifice God made for us...upon the cross: the sacrifice God made in loving us and exercising God's freedom to embrace us.

The call is to a sacrificial freedom which is responsible, and tempered, because it is not an end in itself, nor an end *for* the self, but a freedom seen and lived within the wider context of God's call to embrace life as God intended: a life in community, a life of love and service.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** *The Apostles' Creed (Contemporary)*

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Hear our prayer...
People: ...Gracious Lord Almighty.

THE EUCHARIST

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

We thank you, O God, for the numerous blessings we enjoy. We are grateful for the love of family and friends. We are thankful for this country. We thank you for your church. In our gratitude for having received, may we be eager to give. Accept our offerings as visible reminders of our pledge to worship you and serve our neighbor. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: The Lord be with you.
People: And also with you.
Leader: Lift up your hearts.
People: We lift them to the Lord.
Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
People: It is right to give our thanks and praise.
(The prayer continues...)

The Lord's Prayer (Contemporary)

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

Breaking of the Bread

Communion of the People

(Please hold the bread so that we might partake of it together, to remind us of our participation in this sacrament as a community in unity with Christ. Please drink the cup as you are served, reminding us of our individual participation in this sacrament and our personal commitment to our Lord.)

Prayer

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "I Bind My Heart This Tide"

**1. I bind my heart this tide to the Galilean's side,
to the wounds of Calvary, to the Christ who died for me.
I bind my soul this day to the neighbor far away,
and the stranger near at hand, in this town, and in this land.**

**2. I bind my heart and soul to the God, the Lord of all,
to the God, the poor one's Friend, and the Christ whom God did send.
I bind myself to peace, to make strife and envy cease,
my God, fasten sure the cord of my service to my Lord!**

(Public Domain)

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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