

“Called To Freedom”
Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Our faith story begins at the very beginning of things. God created the world and everything in it and God saw that it was good. There was one thing that would make creation even better for our Creator – someone with whom God could have a personal relationship. So God created us – humankind, in the image of God, male and female, he created us.¹ God wanted to love us and for us to love God in such a way that it would become the bond of our love for one another.

Love is always risky. For God, that meant giving us the freedom to choose not to love him so we would be free to choose to love him. Without such freedom, how could we call our relationship one of love? God had only one tiny request of us, one prohibition, that we not try to be like God. But the thought was irresistible and there was that delicious looking fruit we couldn't wait to taste, so we misused our God-given freedom and began to sing, eons before Frank Sinatra, *I'll do it my way*. The world has never been the same since.

“It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom.”² That's the irony about freedom. The more we exercise it for our own **“self-indulgence,”** the less free we are to love God and neighbor, and the more enslaved we are, trapped by our inhuman and sub-human ways.

God calls us back to freedom over and over again throughout the story. How does God do that? Not by commanding, “You better love me or else...!” Where's the freedom in that? So God enters a relationship with a particular family to show all the families of the earth how neat it is to love God and one another. But Abraham and Sarah and their descendants don't always get it. They mess up. They misuse their freedom, thinking their way is better than God's way.

When the family ends up in slavery in Egypt they cry out for deliverance. **“Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.'”**³ (The old King James Version and the first Revised Standard Version translate *serve* instead of *worship* which seems to be preferred by more recent translations. I supposed *worship* sounds softer than *serve*. Perhaps like the ancient Hebrews, we like the idea of freedom more than we like the idea of serving.) The Hebrews were freed from Egypt, but they didn't understand what they were free for so, in time, they began to sing, *I'll do it my way*.

That's the refrain heard over and over again throughout the story. Some hundreds of years after the Exodus, God's people were once again enslaved by the tyranny of the Roman Empire. They longed for a messiah and God sent one. In his inaugural sermon, Jesus outlines his agenda: **“to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”**⁴

Jesus never sang, *I'll do it my way*. That doesn't mean he didn't know the words or that he didn't like the music. It was all too familiar. You remember the encounter he had with the devil who came to him out of nowhere like Rachel Ray and tempted him with a recipe for 30-minute meals to satisfy all the hungry people simply by turning stones into bread; to dazzle the people with Cirque Du Soleil-type acrobatics high above the ground; and to bow low before the evil one for just a second and all the kingdoms of the world could have been his! Tempting thought, indeed. Who would have blamed Jesus if he did it that way? Doesn't the good and noble end – the salvation of the world – justify the means? Why did Jesus resist? Because Jesus didn't want to exchange one slave master for another.

Jesus fulfills his mission by using his God-given freedom in the most positive way possible – by freely choosing to love God wholly and completely and to serve everyone in love. Of course, it cost Jesus his life. But we affirm with the scriptures that he is **“the way, and the truth and the life.”**⁵ Jesus told his disciples, **“If you continue in my word ... you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”**⁶ Al Gore tells us that the truth can be mighty inconvenient at times, but truth, Jesus promised, is liberating.

Some people in the church in Galatia were beset by many lies. They thought there were a lot of religious hoops one had to jump through in order to be accepted by God. In short, they thought even Gentiles had to obey all the Jewish laws before they could become Christians. “No, no,” Paul wrote to them. “You’ve got it all wrong. All God wants you to do is to love your neighbor as yourself.”

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” They had forgotten, and often so do we, Jesus’ invitation: **“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”**⁷ Jesus is always about relationships, never about religion.

There was another group in Galatia beset by another pack of lies. They thought that because the gospel freed them from religion they could pick up the old refrain, *I'll do it my way!* “No, no,” Paul wrote to them. “You’ve got it all wrong. That kind of thinking will not set you free. It will only trap you in an immoral life-style in which nobody wins and everybody loses. Why use freedom to do something that will make you a slave?” **“Where will your precious freedom be then?”**⁸

God gives us freedom so we can choose to love him and our neighbor, not to run away from him and ignore our neighbor. **“Through love become slaves to one another.”** It doesn't make sense at first, but neither does it make sense to try to be someone you were not created to be and we were created to be lovers of God and neighbor. When you discover such freedom, you begin to sing a new song:

Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free,

Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be.⁹

This passage from Galatians is one of the appointed readings of the day. It's about our relationship with God and has nothing to do with the freedom we will celebrate on Wednesday for the 231st time. Or does it!? Unfortunately, our Philadelphia freedom that has become mostly a celebration of freedom *from* and the favorite song of individual Americans as well as our nation as a whole is, *I'll do it my way*. I pray that someday, sooner rather than later, we would celebrate more what we are free *for* and that we would more readily sing,

America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!¹⁰

Scottish poet Robert Burns once wrote, "O what a gift that God would give us, to see ourselves as others see us." How might other people see us? In the June 11 issue of *Newsweek*, columnist Fareed Zakaria writes,

In a global survey ... most countries polled believed that China would act more responsibly in the world than the United States. How does a Leninist dictatorship come across more sympathetically than the oldest constitutional democracy in the world? Some of this is, of course, the burden of being the biggest. But the United States has been the richest and most powerful nation in the world for almost a century, and for much of this period it was respected, admired and occasionally even loved. The problem today is not that America is too strong but that it is seen as too arrogant, uncaring and insensitive.

I worry that we could lose our freedom if we keep singing, *I'll do it my way*. "Live free or die" is the official motto of New Hampshire. Every time I see it on a license plate, I think, "those are fighting words." Read in a different way, however, they point to a great truth – when we fail to live free, that is, in the way God calls us to be free, by turning away from God and from our neighbor, something within us dies, something essential to our humanity.

Jurgen Moltmann is a German theologian who was drafted into the German army in 1944. He surrendered in 1945 in the dark of night to the first British soldier he met and became a Christian in a prisoner of war camp. Moltmann argues that "the greatest mystery of human existence is not the reality of evil, or injustice, or hatred. Rather, the greatest mystery in the universe is human freedom -- the freedom that God has chosen to give us that enables us to order our lives in any way we see fit. We are free to become a Mother Teresa or an Adolph Hitler. We are free to give our lives to God, or free to crucify Jesus the Christ."

The choice is always left up to us. The Lord says, "**Today ... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.**"¹¹

1. Genesis 1:27
2. Galatians 5:13, *The Message*
3. Exodus 9:1
4. Luke 4:18
5. John 14:6
6. John 8:32
7. Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*
8. Galatians 5:15, *The Message*
9. George Matheson, 1890; #378 in *Presbyterian Hymnal*
10. Katharine Lee Bates, 1893
11. Deuteronomy 30:19