

THE PARADOX OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Thursday, January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln spent most of the day greeting guests at the traditional New Year's Day reception at the White House. From early morning until the afternoon, the President shook hands with members of his Cabinet, the diplomatic corps, Army and Navy officers, and many members of the public. After he finished greeting the guests, Lincoln went upstairs to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. However, he noticed one slight error in the text, so he ordered another copy to be written. Lincoln knew the Supreme Court was opposed to Emancipation and that Chief Justice Roger Taney, who was pro-slavery, would not hesitate to reject the Proclamation based on a single error.

When the new copy of the Emancipation Proclamation was delivered, President Lincoln sat down to sign the document. However, after he picked up his pen, he put it down again. Lincoln did this several times, so that some people in the room thought he had changed his mind about signing the Proclamation. However, the President was massaging the fingers on his right hand and told the people gathered there, "I've been shaking hands for hours and my hand is almost paralyzed. If I sign the proclamation in a quaking hand even though my whole heart is in it, people will look at my signature in one hundred years and think, he hesitated." Lincoln massaged his hand again, picked up his pen, and boldly signed his name. Then he said, "There, that will do." Before he signed the Proclamation, he said, "If my name ever goes into history, it will be for this act." He also said, "I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing the right thing than in signing this paper."¹

In part, the Emancipation Proclamation said, "That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom."²

Of course, the Emancipation Proclamation did not free all slaves in 1863 nor did it provide for the freedom of slaves in territories that would later become states. Slavery wasn't abolished until the 13th Amendment was ratified on December 6, 1865. The amendment reads, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Two and a half years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, on June 19, 1865, U.S. Major General Gordon Granger issued General Order No. 3 in Galveston, Texas. The order read, “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”³

Of course, last Sunday was June 19 and Monday was a Federal holiday recognizing “Juneteenth,” a combination of June and nineteenth. While Juneteenth only became a Federal holiday in 2021, it has been celebrated since 1866 and is the oldest known celebration of the end of slavery in the United States.

Here we are in worship (which, by the way, President Franklin Roosevelt named as one of the four essential freedoms in his January 6, 1941 speech to Congress), halfway between the Juneteenth celebration of freedom from slavery and the 4th of July celebration of our nation’s independence. Even though we still have much work to do to fulfill the lofty goals stated in the opening words of the Declaration of Independence, we are inspired when we read, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” We remember the risks the signers took when they declared, “We, therefore, the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States.”

In light of these proclamations and declarations about freedom and slavery, it might be helpful to define those terms. “Freedom” is defined as “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint; the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved.” Of course, a slave is a person “who is forced to work for and obey another and is considered to be their property.”

“To act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint” – what a wonderful promise! So, it might seem that when Paul proclaims, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1) he means that, as Christians, we are unrestrained. We can do anything and everything we want! On top of that, we have a loving God who will forgive us again and again! What a deal! In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” (Romans 5:20) Logic would argue that the way to get more grace is to sin more! Again, what a great deal! But Paul immediately rejects that idea: “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1-2)

The paradox of the Christian faith is expressed in Galatians 5:13: “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.” That’s right – in

Christ, we are free to become slaves to one another in love. Or, to repeat last Sunday's message and today's gospel reading, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mark 12:29-30)

In his commentary on Christian freedom in Galatians 5, Rodney Sadler writes, "Unlike American freedom, Christian freedom is not about personal liberty; Christian freedom comes with an undeniable sense of obligation and servitude, and complete submission to God and to Christ Jesus. Christian freedom was never intended to be freedom from responsibility to others. 'Through love become slaves to one another.' . . . not just a 'freedom from'; the freedom we receive in Christ is a 'freedom to' commit ourselves to each other. We are called to be slaves to our sisters and brothers, placing their needs above our own. We are called to the freedom of Christ, who in the garden chose the Father's will instead of his own. . ."⁴

We know that "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" isn't a license to do anything and everything we want, with no restrictions. When we fully realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, we will truly commit ourselves as individuals and as a nation to ensure that all citizens will enjoy those privileges. That necessarily means we must impose restrictions on our freedom so all of our neighbors can enjoy the same freedoms we desire for ourselves.

The same can be said of how we live as Christians. Christian freedom that leads to doing anything and everything we want to do with no concern for our neighbors is not true freedom in Christ. Instead, as Paul says, we discover and display our true Christian freedom when "through love [we] become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14)

Judge Learned Hand never served as a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, but is considered to be one of the greatest judges ever to serve our country. He was a Federal judge for fifty-two years. On May 21, 1944, Judge Hand delivered a speech entitled "The Spirit of Liberty" to an estimated 1.5 million people, including many newly naturalized citizens in New York City's Central Park. Although Judge Hand's speech was given during World War II and addressed the threats our country faced, his comments seem especially applicable to the paradox of Christian freedom.

On that Sunday in the park, Judge Hand said, "And what is this liberty that must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. . . What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit that weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near 2,000 years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten; that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest."⁵

We can define Christian liberty/Christian freedom, because Jesus and Paul and the New Testament teach us the true meaning of Christian freedom: Love God. Love neighbor. True Christian freedom, paradoxically, means submitting ourselves to God's will and seeking the best interests of our neighbors alongside our own without bias.

At our session meeting Tuesday night, we talked again about what the future might hold for us as the Wallace Presbyterian Church as we emerge from the pandemic. What shape will our mission and ministry take in the days, months, and years to come? The recurring theme in our conversations around the table in Room 304 is loving our neighbors, which means meeting our neighbors where they are. I encourage you to join your elders and me in praying for and seeking God's guidance through the Holy Spirit so we can discern God's will for our congregation. How can we best embrace and live into the true Christian freedom of becoming slaves to one another and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves?

Let us pray: Gracious God, you call us to serve you in freedom and in peace. Give us faith, strength, and courage that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will. Inspire us to live and worship in your freedom and for the sake of your Kingdom. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who welcomes all to be free indeed. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information is taken from different sources:

Carl Schoettler, "A page from the history books Archive: The delicate script of the Emancipation Proclamation was strong enough to turn a nation around," January 21, 1998 at www.baltimoresun.com.

Melissa Block, "'Emancipating Lincoln': A Pragmatic Proclamation," March 13, 2012 at www.npr.org.

²Transcription of the Proclamation, January 1, 1863 at www.archives.org.

³Michael Davis, "National Archives Safeguards Original 'Juneteenth' General Order," June 19, 2020 at www.archives.org.

⁴Rodney S. Sadler, Jr, "Alternative Freedom: Galatians 5:1-26," June 12, 2007 at www.christiancentury.org.

⁵"The 'Spirit of Liberty' Speech," Judge Learned Hand, presented in 1944 during "I Am an American Day" at www.learnedhand.org.