

Mark 12:28-34

Galatians 5:1-15

October 2, 2022

World Communion Sunday

Reception of New Members, Baptisms, The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE
“Living Out the Life of 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 Tuesday, January 6, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his “annual message to Congress,” now formally known as the “State of the Union Address.” Although the country was still eleven months away from Pearl Harbor and the formal declaration of war on Japan and Germany, the President used his speech to lay out his vision for the state of the post-war world. Near the very end of his address, Roosevelt said, “In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.” He then listed the four essential human freedoms -- freedom speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

Inspired by President Roosevelt’s speech about the four freedoms, Norman Rockwell decided to illustrate them as part of his support of the war effort. Eventually *The Saturday Evening Post* and the Department of the U.S. Treasury sponsored a national tour of Rockwell’s four paintings and works of other illustrators, in order to sell war bonds and stamps. Each person who bought bonds and stamps received a set of Rockwell’s illustrations of the four freedoms. You’ve probably seen these pictures before.



Three and a half years later, on May 21, 1944, Judge Learned Hand, sometimes known as the Tenth Justice of the Supreme Court (although he was never appointed to the highest court), delivered a speech called “What Is Liberty?” to over a million people gathered in New York City’s Central Park for “I Am an American Day.” In his brief speech, Judge Hand declared that the essence of liberty was not to be found in constitutions, laws, or courthouses but “in the hearts of men and women.” “Liberty,” he said, “lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there, it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it. And what is this liberty which 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. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few - as we have learned to our sorrow.”¹

Both President Roosevelt and Judge Hand spoke in secular circumstances to address the political threat of war to freedom. But at the heart of their two addresses lies the fundamental principle of the Apostle Paul’s appeal to the Christian believers in Galatia – “For freedom Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5:1) To paraphrase Judge Hand, “Freedom in Christ lies in the hearts of men and women. While it lies there it needs no works of the law to save it or added to it in order to save you.”

Remember what Judge Hand also said? “This liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women . . . is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes.” That sounds very much like what Paul wrote to the Galatians: “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.” (Galatians 5:13)

Both President Roosevelt and Judge Hand proclaimed the importance of the common good and effort to maintain the fragile and essential human freedoms. That is Paul’s point. The ***gospel*** he proclaims is freedom in Christ. The ***responsibility*** he names is love for your neighbor that comes from your freedom in Christ. Here’s how the Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams describes what it means to be *really* free in Christ (this is from her July 1, 2007 sermon called “The Predicament of Freedom”): “To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of ‘me, myself, and I.’ To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self and, as one who is wise has put it, to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service. To be free is to be free ***for*** responsibility, not ***from*** responsibility. I

think of how Christ Jesus who had everything in the world going for himself – power, status, safety – how he chose, freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for the sake of the world.

Now that is freedom.”²

And that is the paradox of our freedom in Christ. That is the paradox of living the cross-shaped life. We are free to become servants of others out of love. Our freedom in Christ reminds us that we are not our own but, as the opening words of “A Brief Statement of Faith” of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declare, “In life and in death we belong to God.” As we gather at the baptismal font this morning and baptize Mary Camron and Winston, we are encouraged to remember our own baptisms, or at least the meaning of our own baptisms. As one writer has put it, in baptism we remember that “We are not our own. We are God’s people. We belong to God . . . we are at the mercy of the gracious triune God, who claims us in the clear, cleansing waters of baptism.”³

And as we gather at the Lord’s table this morning on this World Communion Sunday, we remember that true freedom that led Jesus Christ to give himself up for us out of love. As one person describes what we are doing at the table, “The One who invites us to the Table reminds us that we are to live as the divine host lived. We are empowered to remember to seek reconciliation with Christ, an act that compels reconciliation also with one another. To say we ‘trust in God . . . who feeds us . . .’ means we have faith in the Word of God – faith in the Word who became flesh, lived among us, and provided the model for our actions. We are invited to the Table to be nurtured for Christlike living. We are called to commit ourselves anew to love and serve God and one another.”⁴

As you consider your freedom in Christ, symbolized by the waters of baptism and nourished by the bread and cup, think seriously about what it means to you and for you to live out the life of freedom in Christ. Here’s how *The Message* proclaims the gospel of love and the call to freedom: “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. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom.”

Just after I finished this sermon, I received an email from a friend who is concerned about a painful situation in her church. This is what she wrote at the end of her message: “I wonder if we as a people much less a church have put the Great Commandment on the back page. Love heals so

much. Maybe that is the answer for the church. Just something as simple and as complicated as that: Christian love for each other.”

For freedom Christ has set us free — to love God with everything we are and everything we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Just something as simple and as complicated as that.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for the freedom we have in Christ. Help us live in holiness and righteousness, always to your praise and glory, serving others through Christ's love. May we continue to abide in him, that we may know the truth and be set free. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “The Spirit of Liberty” Speech by Judge Learned Hand, 1944 at www.thefire.org.

² Joanna Adams, “The Predicament of Freedom,” Sunday, July 1, 2007 at www.day1.org.

³ Philip W. Butin, “What Presbyterians Believe: Baptism – The Waters of Baptism” at www.presbyterianmission.org.

⁴ Melva Wilson Costen, “What Presbyterians Believe: Communion – The Lord’s Feast,” at www.presbyterianmission.org.