The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
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VI Pentecost (Proper 9, Year C), Galatians 6.1-16

Lord God Almighty, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn: Grant, we beseech thee, that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain these liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Collect for Independence Day, p. 190)

Good morning! And a happy Independence Day to you.

In the opening of his letter to the "churches of Galatia," the apostle Paul declares that Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:1-3). He argues that Jesus' offering affords this freedom to both Jew and Gentile, for everyone who is in Christ has been made a descendant of Abraham. In the third chapter, Paul memorably declares, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:28-29). All of us, therefore, enjoy an equal share in the Grace of God. *All of us, therefore, enjoy an equal share in the Grace of God.*

Moreover, the sign of this unity is no longer adherence to the Law, but "faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:15-16). Paul proclaims: "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (2:19-21).

Here Paul holds in tension two concerns: one, that the Jewish community can find meaning in its history and heritage as forbearers of Jesus' community; and, two, that the Gentile community is made an equal inheritor of God's promises as members – *by faith* – of the *new* Israel. Rhetorically, he asks, "Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not!" (3:21) Rather, "before faith came, we were…guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came" (3:23-24). And why did Christ come? "so that we might be justified by faith. [And now] that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus..all [are] children of God through faith (3:23-26). Therefore, our identity as God's people is not dependent upon either our blood or our compliance to a code, but on our faith, our simple acceptance of the gift that God in Christ offers everyone.

Now this is a bargain, so much easier than being a First Century Jew: God's love becomes available to all people, and no one needs any longer be subject to the burdens of Judaic law. And Paul – emphatically – doubles down on these ideas in his treatise's crescendo claim: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not again submit to the yoke of slavery," the yoke of slavery which is the Law (5:1).

Of course, there is risk in this new arrangement, so Paul warns against people falling into that familiar trap of being people: "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence…Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh" (5:13, 16-17).

"Oh, dear apostle!" we respond incredulously. "Us?! We are spirit-y, not flesh-y...but just in case, so that we know what to look for if our neighbor is falling off the wagon, what might such desires be?"

And Paul replies, "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" (5:19-21).

"Oooooh…*those* desires of the flesh."

See, this freedom we have been given is not simply a freedom *from*, but is a freedom *for*…. *not simply a freedom* from, *but a freedom* for: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters…[now,] through love[,] become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:13-15). By the model of Jesus, we set down one yoke in order to take up another, becoming slaves – in love – of one another, and "by contrast [to the works of the flesh]," we will instead live by "the fruit of the Spirit" (5:22). And what is the fruit of the Spirit? According to Paul, nothing less than "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness…and self-control" (5:22-23).

God has founded our new community upon these principles, and "if anyone is detected in a transgression, [we] who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness," for so, too, have we been restored by God (6:1). In gentleness, we will not see one another's weaknesses as opportunities for exploitation or ridicule – no! We will receive such occasions as opportunities for reconciliation to "practice our religion," and honor the gift we have received. We will "bear one another's burdens, and in [all these ways, we] will fulfill the [new] law of Christ," a law of love toward our neighbors (6:2). This is who we are: hopeful laborers in the plentiful vineyard; peace lenders in the homes of strangers; Kingdom bearers in the King's creation.

Last week on his late night program, Jimmy Kimmel offered: "[The Fourth of July is] my favorite holiday: no gifts; no church; just a Zippo lighter and a trunk full of explosives." My childhood memories of the occasion are not much different. My paternal grandparents lived outside of the Monroe city limits, so my dad would load up our trunk full of fireworks, load up the backseat full of children, and head to the bayou for its looser restrictions on combustible materials. My grandfather, who we called Sir, smoked Kool Menthols, and he would walk with me in the dark, lighting my Roman candles with the burning tip of his cigarette. And holding the cardboard cannon in an outstretched arm, not unlike Lady Liberty herself, the glowing balls would reflect red, white, and blue – and orange and green – in the water just beyond the cypress knees kneeling at the peninsula bank.

We enjoy such grand privilege in this nation. We can companion our Freedom faith with civic liberty, partner stars on the bayou with the good company of a good granddad. And like

our Christian tradition, neither is the freedom of our national birthright, free. Our sovereignty apart from Great Britain, announced in the signing of the Declaration of Independence on this day in 1776, is not freedom for indulgence's sake, but for the sake of freedom's preservation; liberty, not for indulgence's sake, but for the sake of upholding these "inalienable rights...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The Declaration's authors announce these convictions as "self evident," in accord with "the laws of nature," and as an entitlement of "nature's God," and they expect that, "to secure these rights…[the government would derive its] just power from the consent of the governed," our laws and leaders modeling for the citizenry these founding principles (Declaration of Independence).

I do not suggest that the founders of these United States intended that ours would be a Christian nation, based upon Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Clearly – wisely – they did not. And I propose, in light of that same Epistle, we Christians should seek such a prepensely dispassionate government, for a faith demanded is no faith at all, but subjection to a new law, against which Paul specifically warns, declaring that if we allow ourselves to be subject to such a mortal mandate – then "Christ will be of no benefit to [us]" (5:2). Indeed, for the sake of our country, we must bring more to liberty's endeavor than Zippo lighters and champagne glasses. And, for the sake of our conscience, we must bring more to faith's enterprise than obligatory conviction. We must bring our whole hearts – our souls and bodies, unencumbered bounties and unburdened blessings – that we would serve our neighbors as ourselves, not according to any statute, but according to our inheritance in Jesus Christ: a new community of God!

By faith, we are *free*, free for love – and not by edict, but by gift. People of God: "…a new creation is everything! [And] for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (6:15-16).