

Our UCC Faith: Guided & Bound by the Spirit
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 20:19-23; Galatians 5:13-26

"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." ¹

When the Continental Congress declared the separation of the colonies from Great Britain 241 years ago, liberty was foremost in their minds. But the idea did not originate with them, of course. In every age human beings have, as the inscription of the Statue of Liberty reads, yearned to *"breathe free."*

Three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Hebrew people suffered under bondage in Egypt. They yearned for freedom. God sent Moses, who demanded of Pharaoh, *"Let my people go!"* When Pharaoh refused, God delivered.

A thousand years later, the people were again oppressed; both by the tyranny of the Roman Empire and the powers and principalities of the world, and God sent a man named Jesus. Quoting Isaiah, he announced in his very first sermon that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit *"to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives. . .to let the oppressed go free."²*

This same Jesus would later say to his closest followers, *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . .so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."³*

Freedom, it seems, is an idea that originates in the very heart of God.

¹ From The Declaration of Independence, adopted in Philadelphia on July 4th, 1776

² Isaiah 61:1, Luke 4:18

³ John 8: 31-32

In the beginning, when God created humankind, God could have made us puppet-like, so that whenever God wanted us to do something, God would just pull a string and we would do it. But what kind of relationship would that be? No, instead God chose freedom.

God created us with the capacity and responsibility to act as free moral agents. But although there are more than fifty references to freedom in the New Testament, here in Galatians, Paul critiques it.

This is because he knew that the church in Galatia was divided into camps. There were those who believed that freedom meant license to do whatever you pleased. Those people were called Gnostics. Their claim was that setting the human spirit free from matter and flesh is the whole point of life. They believed that what you actually do is of little consequence, so everyone should do what they please. All freedom – no responsibility.

In response, Paul cautioned, "*Do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves of one another, for the whole law is summed up in this single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"⁴

Another camp in Galatia was made up of those who believed it was crucial to strictly adhere to their religious rituals, the most significant being circumcision. They believed that freedom in Christ was all well and good, but they still felt safer following Torah, the laws they had been passed down from their elders.

Paul was convinced that observing these rituals or not was of no consequence. He believed "*The only thing that counts is faith working through love.*"⁵

It seems that each generation of Jesus' followers must learn that Christian liberty is a function of fidelity to the law of love.

Just as each generation of Americans must learn what our Pledge of Allegiance proclaims: that civil liberty is a function of fidelity to justice.

⁴ Galatians 5:13-14

⁵ Galatians 5:6

The great 20th- century religious thinker Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: *"Basically love means . . . being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."*

To be truly free is to be liberated from the prison of "*me, myself, and I*". It is to be able to move beyond the self and into the risk of love, it is the giving of oneself to the demand of service.

To be truly free is to be free for responsibility, not from it.

I think of Jesus, who could have had everything in the world (power, status, safety), but freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a suffering servant. Now that is freedom.

I think of how God made us as one human family, irrevocably bound to one another from the very beginning so that we are by nature inclined toward one another. The need of the other is really our own need. The suffering of the other is, in a real sense, our own suffering.

It has been a difficult week for so many people. Here in the United States, the rancor of politics seems to have risen above the need to do anything positive for hurting people, causing fear and mistrust among so many. Overseas, my friends living in my beloved Jerusalem encountered violence and oppression, their protests for access to holy sites met with tear gas bombs and rubber bullets.

I'm finding it really hard to not be cynical about this world. Maybe you feel that same way too.

Frederick Buechner wrote: *"If you have not cried for someone other than yourself in the last year, then the chances are you are already dead."*

I guess that's a good place to start, having feelings of empathy for those who are suffering. But tears aren't enough, we've got to do something... make a call, offer comfort, stand up for someone whose voice is not being heard. How did Paul put it? *"The only thing that matters is faith working in love."*

By the will of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, freedom and responsibility must be balanced in our personal lives – but also in the life of our faith communities. Sure, here at church we are free to come and go as we please. As your pastor, I’m not going to make you feel guilty for not pledging or not participating in one of the church’s ministries. But I am going to invite you strongly to pledge and participate. I do this for the simple reason that I believe we are responsible to one another. This is one of the most crucial beliefs in the United Church of Christ - we balance freedom with responsibility.

The same is true, I believe, for our nation. One of America's greatest gifts to the world is the notion of religious liberty and tolerance. It’s what made our country unique. Most other nations before ours had a “state religion”, which all citizens were compelled to participate in. But here in the United States, the government cannot impose religion. All our citizens are free to exercise religion (or not), according to their own wishes.

And yet, people of faith have always had a crucial role to play in the life of our country. It is we who have consistently worked towards a just society marked by concern for the common good. Think of the abolition of slavery and women’s suffrage, both movements are rooted in American Christianity. We are the ones who listen for the voices of those who are not being heard. We speak out against excessive self-indulgence. We name the corrosive consequences of greed.

As people of faith, we have a particular calling to be a servant people, to bring good news to the oppressed, to model justice, to proclaim liberty to the captives. Can you think of a time that called for moral leadership more than these troubled days? Oh, what an opportunity and responsibility we have, my friends! To repair the breach, to raise up leaders, to offer hope for all those who mourn in our midst and beyond our shores...

Can a nation be holy? The eighteenth-century men and women who founded this nation believed so. They dreamed a holy dream and gave their first settlements holy names to match: New Haven. Providence. Concord. Salem, (which means *shalom*, the peace of God). Dreams like that die hard, and (please, dear God!) there is still some echo of those dreams in the air around us.

But for years now, the meek of the earth have been scared stiff at the ability we have to blow the earth to smithereens a thousand times over. Will we ever work out a way of significantly limiting that hideous power? Here in Fairfield County, the wealthiest area of the richest country in the world, the poor still go to bed hungry (if they are lucky enough to have a bed at all), as so many are searching for safe schools for their children, or decent care when they are sick and old.

Maybe that's just the way it is with nations. By definition they are consumed with their own interests, so much so that they have no eye for holiness, no ears to hear the great command to be saints, no heart to break at the thought of what this world could be. Just imagine the friends we could be as nations if we could learn to listen to each other instead of shouting at each other! Think of the problems we could help each other solve, and all the human anguish we could join together to heal.

You and I are the eyes and ears. You and I are the heart. And we have always known what was wrong with us. The malice in us, even at our most civilized. Our insincerity, the masks we do our real business behind. The envy, the way other people's fortune can sting us like wasps. The way we stereotype each other, even when we say we love each other. All this infantile nonsense and ugliness. For Christ's sake, grow up.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, may our pledge of allegiance be this day to be the kind of kingdom on earth, as is found in heaven. For real.

Let us pray... Most merciful God, we praise you for the privilege of worshipping you openly and freely. Help us to hunger and thirst and work for all that is good, until your kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. Amen.