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**Pentecost 05, July 2, 2023**

**“Liberty and Civility”**

**Read: Galatians 5: 1 - 15 and/or memorize: Galatians 5: 1**

The United States will celebrate its 247<sup>th</sup> anniversary this July 4<sup>th</sup>. That’s a long time for a democracy to remain free. Compared to civilizations like Egypt, China, Japan, Rome, Greece and many others, America’s history seems short.

Consider this: In the span of five men, we can cover the entire life of our country. When Thomas Jefferson, a founding father died, Abraham Lincoln was a young man of 17. When Lincoln was assassinated Woodrow Wilson was a boy of 8. When Woodrow Wilson died Ronald Reagan was a boy of 12. At the time of Ronald Reagan’s election in 1981 a young man named Barak Obama was just turning 20 years old. Do you think he was considering the presidency then?

As I said we are young, yet we stand tall among the nations because of the principles on which we are established: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

We celebrate our freedom this week, and freedom needs to be celebrated. We want to celebrate the freedom with which God has blessed our great nation. I do think we need to be careful when talking about that.

Some liken our relationship to God with that of Israel. I don’t think that is really a good analogy. We are not the chosen people, but God led us to establish principles on which our country is based. Perhaps our nation is a good example of how, if you follow the Bible, you will receive the blessings it intends.

At the same time, I want to temper our celebration with a bit of caution: with great freedom comes great responsibility. Freedom does not exist to live excessive lives; liberty does not mean we act without concern for others. As St. Paul so eloquently put it: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge in the sinful nature.”

Let us keep in mind this truth: liberty demands civility. Freedom requires righteous behavior. So, let us celebrate freedom and civility. Those are two key elements of being a free people and nation. They are also in jeopardy.

First, celebrate liberty. The apostle Paul was a champion of liberty. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire starting churches. One of the those was the Galatian church. It might be one of

the most important for it is there in the middle of the Empire that his message of Christian freedom was vigorously opposed.

Here's what happened: during Paul's missionary journey he founded several churches in Asia minor, which is today the country of Turkey. Those converts to Christianity, some of them, Jews, and others, Gentiles, living in that area, accepted the Gospel as Paul preached it.

The essence of Paul's message can be found in Galatians 2: 16. Here is what it says: "Man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." A straight forward message of salvation by grace through faith.

Unfortunately, there were Christian Jews who believed Paul went too far and they came in after Paul left and told these new Gentile converts that while Paul was right in what he said he was only half right. They would have to observe certain ceremonial practices of the Old Testament which, they claimed, were still binding on the church.

Among them was the covenant symbol of circumcision for the Jewish people. When Paul heard about that he was really upset. Paul's response to these people, whom he called Judaizers, is the book of Galatians.

Paul's tense warnings to his followers are: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law are cut off from Christ, you have fallen away from grace."

Paul adds some biting humor. The word "cut off" used by Paul means separating oneself from the Gospel, but the same word describes the act of circumcision. He is giving a serious warning about this freedom that they have gained through Christ. They will lose their freedom if they submit to circumcision.

The founders of our great nation were just as serious about political and religious freedom. They made very little distinction between them. That is why the Declaration says that liberty is a right endowed not by nature but by God Himself. Throughout history we have been serious about liberty ever since.

Thomas Jefferson, with a bit of humor, in absolute seriousness said, "Were it left to me to decide if we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." We need our freedoms to help keep us free.

Why be so serious about freedom? Because we are called to be free. That is the bedrock of our relationship to God. God gives people freedom. We are made in His image, free to live, think and act. In Jesus, God gives us freedom from the Old Testament Law, and through grace the liberty to be free from sin, death and the devil.

**There is one sobering thought: there always has been and always will be those who are opposed to freedom. Paul faced it with the Judaizers. Luther faced it in the Reformation. Lincoln fought it out on the battlefields of Civil War. Martin Luther King encountered it on the streets of Memphis. John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address warned the enemies of liberty: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we will pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe in order to assure the survival and success of liberty.” These can never be empty words.**

**Why is there such a difficulty about this liberty in our world? Do people really prefer tyranny, dictatorship and control over democracy and freedom? That’s a really hard one to answer.**

**Perhaps this is a way one might look at it. There are some who need to control; some who wish to be controlled. For them that type of government makes them less anxious. Then, there are those who prefer freedom.**

**So, yes, let’s celebrate our liberty. Let’s not forget to celebrate also our responsibility to civility. We have become less civil. We can lay the blame in many places, but the reality is it’s our responsibility. Our freedom to bear a heavy burden.**

**Peter Marshall, pastor and Chaplain of the U. S. Senate said, “The choice before us is plain: Christ or chaos, conviction or compromise, discipline or disintegration. I’m rather tired of hearing about our rights and privileges as American citizens. The time has come – it is now – when we ought to hear about the duties and responsibilities of our citizenship. America’s future depends on her accepting and demonstrating God’s government.”**

**“Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” That is the wisdom of President John Adams.**

**The apostle Paul understood the inseparable link between liberty and civility. After warning the Galatians not to go back to circumcision and the law of Moses he then answers his critics who are charging him with teaching the Gentiles to indulge themselves in whatever behavior they like.**

**Look at Romans 5: 13, “Do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” I hope it sounds familiar to you: “Every day disciples, Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!” You use your freedom for others; you use it to build up. Freedom needs to be used to pursue good. That’s why Gathering, Growing, Giving and Going are vital in our understanding of our liberty and civility.**

**Paul doesn’t stop there. He reminds us of the fruit that God has given us in order to accomplish the mission: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The message here is clear. Liberty and civility are two parts of the whole. Alexander Fraser Tytler lived at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote a book about the decline and fall of the Athenian Republic.**

**In it he found that the ancient democracies waned under the selfishness of the human hearts. He wrote: “The average age of the world’s greatest civilizations has been around two hundred years. These nations have progressed through the following sequence.”**

**From bondage to spiritual freedom;  
From spiritual freedom to great courage;  
From courage to liberty;  
From liberty to abundance;  
From abundance to selfishness;  
From selfishness to complacency;  
From complacency to apathy;  
From apathy to dependency;  
From dependency back to bondage.**

**It is awfully easy to point our finger at someone else and say it’s their fault. It’s not. Each of us is responsible. We cannot hand this over to someone else. We cannot assign it to the governments. We cannot assign it to the person next door.**

**The only person to whom we can assign responsibility is ourselves. As we each take responsibility to make freedom and civility the watchword of everything we do and every relationship we participate in, we will see a change, just as we see a change when people come to faith in Jesus.**

**When we no longer live for ourselves, but live for God and His purpose, we will be living as God wants us to live and that will result in the blessings of freedom and civility for us and our nation through faith in Jesus Christ alone.**

**Count me in: How will you use your liberty to advance civility in your community?**