

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 4, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“FREEDOM OF ANOTHER KIND”

Scriptures:

Galatians 6:1-10

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost



“**NO** more pencils! No more books! No more teachers’ dirty looks!” Over the past several weeks elementary and secondary schools all over the area have been letting out for summer. And at this time every year I am reminded of the day over 20 years ago now when I was standing outside my children’s elementary school, waiting for them to be released on the last day, when a little boy about seven came running towards his mother, papers flying, metal lunch box clanging, hands waving, shouting: “I’m free! I’m free!” [I wondered at the time about the future of this young man’s educational experience...]

It may be safe to say that the significance of freedom is in the eye of the beholder. Judging by the products on the shelves of our stores, we prize many kinds of freedom. We want to be insect-free! And lint-free! Additive-free and sugar-free; wrinkle-free and, of course, pain-free. And I do believe we all identify with the child being set free from school for the summer and long, too, to be worry-free and trouble-free and carefree.

The freedom that we celebrate today, our nation’s 234th birthday, is grounded in our struggle for independence from foreign rule. Our Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776 and our Constitution was adopted in 1787. But, preceding our Constitution by nearly 600 years was the Magna Carta, sealed and distributed throughout his realm by King John of England in 1215, and widely viewed as one of the most important legal documents in the history of democracy. The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians, a portion of which we read this morning, written between the years 40 and 50 C.E. is often described as the Magna Carta of Christian liberty.

To understand that claim, imagine if you will, much like our early pilgrims who came here to begin a new life, only to find that the yoke of King George followed them demanding compliance with the laws and taxes of Britain, imagine now the new converts to the Way of Jesus in the first century. During that time you may have been Jewish all your life and then accepted Jesus as Lord. Or you may have been a non-Jew, a Gentile, and accepted Jesus as Lord.

If you were a Jew, you continued adhering to the laws and customs and rituals of the Law of Moses, which we find in the first 5 books of our Old Testament. As a Gentile, you never did observe that law, and as a Gentile living in Galatia, hundreds of miles from Jerusalem, you may not even be familiar with the Law of Moses. Imagine yourself as a new Gentile convert, specifically a Galatian. You're not familiar with the Law of Moses, but through Paul and others who have come to Galatia and have been teaching you about Jesus, you have tossed aside your pagan idols, seen the light and accepted Jesus as Lord. The Law of Moses never was and is not now on your radar. Now Paul leaves and goes on to his next mission, and as you begin to understand and build the church in Galatia, along comes a group of Christian Jews to Galatia and they say to you, "Now, hold on a minute" and they let you know in no uncertain terms that if you want to start your new life as a Christian, you need to adhere to the Law of Moses, too, and that, among a host of other things, means circumcision.

If you can imagine that, then you can imagine a Galatian picking up the phone and calling Paul: Hello, Paul? Oh, yeah, things here are great. Grace and peace, to you, too. Hey, listen, when you were here the last time and you taught us about Jesus, I gotta tell you, it saved my life. There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus is the way. But, hey – I don't remember you telling us anything about observing the Law of Moses. I didn't realize at the time that we needed to adopt that, too. Yeah, I'm not sure we can observe the dietary stuff. And, well, truthfully, we're all wondering here about this circumcision requirement. I don't remember that part – do we have to do *that* to be included in Jesus' kingdom?"

And Paul writes back his letter to the Galatians, eventually termed by some as the Magna Carta of Christian Liberty, responding to this question, and he says, no, you need not be a slave to the law, to matters of the flesh, you are free of that, it doesn't matter one way or the other, you are part of a new creation, one in the Spirit. And in the part of his letter we read this morning, he tells the Galatians how to live, free from the old law, but fulfilling the law of Christ.

So one way we can interpret freedom in the new life in Christ as described by Paul is freedom from oppressive, irrelevant, ancient laws, just as the original 13 colonies declared their freedom from the oppressive laws and practices of King George affecting their new life here. And we know neither kind of freedom is like the kind you feel as a child in June when school is finished for the summer - worry-free, trouble-free, carefree. Freedom in the new life in Christ, just as freedom in a democracy, means responsibilities.

But freedom in Christ does not mean independence in the same way we celebrate it today on the 4th of July. Paul tells the Galatians and us that we need to meet each other's transgressions with a spirit of gentleness. That we must bear each other's burdens. That if we think we're really something, we're deceiving ourselves. We reap what we sow. Yes, God's grace has been shed on us, but God has given us free will, too, and Paul writes that we will reap what we sow.

Friends, we have seen as citizens of this independent nation that we live in an interdependent world. We tune in to news of the Asian financial markets first thing in the morning to see how Wall Street will behave later in the day. Our flights are grounded here when volcanic ash erupts across the sea. We will eventually see the ramifications of a Gulf oil spill on our northeastern shores, too.

Freedom in Christ means that we are free to think and act beyond our conventional parameters, beyond the lines that we humans have set up. Freedom in Christ means that, when justified, we can come out from under the old rules and work towards that new creation in new ways. As Paul wrote to the Galatians and is repeated in our bulletins this morning, and continues to have meaning for us, especially today: “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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

And Paul recognizes that being slaves to one another, bearing each other’s burdens, recognizing our dependence on each other and on our God is not easily done, and he gives us encouragement and hope. He writes: So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...”

Friends, on this Independence Day, as we celebrate the deep love we have for our country which offers so many freedoms, let us also remember and re-dedicate ourselves to our lives in Christ, which require us to see beyond earthly nations, to view others not just as citizens of other countries, but as children loved by our one God, and which require us to work to heal all of God’s creation, not just our own corner of the world. May we run in joy out from under the assumptions and practices and barriers which keep God’s people oppressed and God’s planet in decay, and with our hands waving and voices shouting, let us proclaim our true freedom, our freedom in Jesus Christ. Amen.