

Free to Be Me – July 9, 2017

Galatians 5:1; 3:28; 5:22-23

As a child, I was told that I was free to be whatever I wanted to be. I was the first granddaughter on both sides of my family and was always made to feel that girls were not only equal to boys, but special. \* I was shocked as a teenager when I realized that there were fields not open to girls and privileges not afforded to girls. Last year, I noted in a sermon that the biggest blessing in my marriage has been the freedom I have always felt to be myself there and to be valued for who I am. And fortunately for me (and many others), the United Methodist Church decided in 1956 that God did, in fact, call women as well as men into ministry, so that when I decided to become a candidate for ministry in 1981, there was no one to tell me that I couldn't.

Before I began that path to ordained ministry, I did some volunteer work for a group that advocated for persons with mental retardation. The training I received began by pointing out that pictures of mentally handicapped children were never used in solicitation for groups who did this kind of advocacy. \*Research had shown that such pictures scared and even repelled people and so proved counter-productive for the projects supported by such groups.

In his recent book, Fear of the Other, Bishop Will Willimon reminds us that rejection of those who look and act differently than we do is in fact, based in fear. \*He goes on to say we Christians often fear the "Other" more than we fear disappointing Jesus when we reject others.

This morning's Scripture from Galatians is a reminder that we seem to need others to look and behave as we do. The apostle Paul was not happy as he sat

down to write to the church at Galatia.\* He thought they weren't getting the point. He says they have forgotten why Jesus died. He reminds them that we are freed by the love of God, not the law of God. That is, we are saved by grace and not by works. Paul believes the Galatians have reverted to being a people governed by rules instead of by love. One commentary describes Galatians as "the Magna Carta of Christian Freedom". \*The Christians in Galatia were concerned that some of their group had not been observing Jewish dietary laws: they had been eating with Gentiles! As strange as this concept sounds to us now, there was a strong group saying these believers had to become Jews – follow Jewish dietary laws and be circumcised in order to be Christians! Paul tells them that circumcision and the right diet will not make them Christian. I would digress a moment to say, that if the ones called Judaizers had won that argument, Christianity might well have remained a small Jewish sect and we would not be Christians today! Christianity needed to be free to include people of all backgrounds in order to spread across the world.

The word testament means covenant or promise. \*We know the Old Testament as the covenant of law – works righteousness, if you will. The concept is that if we follow the rules, we gain God's favor and are saved. The trouble with that covenant is that we can't do it! No matter how hard we try, at some point, we fall short. We call the New Testament the covenant of love. We are saved by love, not by what we do, or don't do. One message of Galatians is that God's love saves us from the bondage of rules, which we can never master. Recently, I read that the true mark of Christian parents is not how they discipline their children, but how they love them. Paul tells the Galatians that if salvation depends on our following the letter of the law, then Jesus died for nothing!

All of us have things about ourselves that we should change - things to work on because none of us is perfect, but Christianity tells us that God loves us in spite of those shortcomings. The theologian Paul Tillich said that the gospel message is that we are accepted although unacceptable.\* The core of the Christian message is that God loves us as we are, no matter what.

Certainly, it is painful when we are rejected because we have failed to work on our shortcomings or we have worked on them, but have failed to master them. However, the point I most want to make today from Galatians is this: **the most difficult rejections are the ones that come because of who we intrinsically are and cannot change;** \*that we are mentally gifted or challenged, male or female, black or white, young or old, skinny or fat, straight or gay, handicapped or from a different part of the world – things we do not have the power to change about ourselves. Psychologists tell us that as hard as it is to overcome the guilt Paul talks about first in Galatians– regret about how we have failed to measure up by the choices we have made - it is almost impossible to overcome **shame** – the guilt or embarrassment about who we are, independent of choice. How do we overcome the message that **who we are** is shameful and unacceptable? There is a story from the Hebrew Talmud\* (the Talmud being moral instruction for Jews in which a rabbi is riding a horse along the seashore and encounters a man who is exceedingly ugly. The rabbi says to the man, “How can you be so ugly?” \*the other replies, “Speak to the Craftsman who made me”. “Please forgive me”, the rabbi says. The ugly man replies, “I will not forgive you until you go the Craftsman who made me and say how ugly is the vessel you made!” One of the points here is that we are called to welcome, accept and love all those whom God created, or else take issue with the Creator, not the one who was created. What does it mean that

God is our Creator? Scripture tells us that as the children of God we are all made in God's image and beloved. \*The Galatians wanted to limit that image to Jews. So -what does made in God's image mean to us? If we limit God's human image, it might make sense to align with God's human son Jesus.\* Jesus, who was a Jew, dark complexed and dark eyed – one commentator said we worship a man that many of us would be uncomfortable sitting next to on an airplane.

We have just once again celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.\* As Americans, we have so many freedoms! It is good to be reminded of the blessings of freedom of speech, religion and assembly. Many peoples of the world do not enjoy the guarantees we do with the US Constitution. But that is still freedom in the law – Galatians asserts that true freedom is in the love of God. It is in Christ there is no east or west, no male or female. The Christian 4<sup>th</sup> of July message is that we are not ultimately freed by law or by any of our own efforts, but by turning to and relying on God's steadfast love for us. And if we claim that for ourselves, how can we as Christians, not claim it for every other child God created?

In seminary, I was once told that "created in God's image" means able to be creative and able to be in loving relationships. First, we need to be in loving relationship to God – and then with God's children\* – who as the song we will soon sing says are differently abled and labeled, but who are all part of the circle around Jesus Christ. Even knowing that girls are special, it turns out that I couldn't be anything I chose to be. I could not, for example, be an airline pilot because I have no sense of direction and am not good with spatial relationships – **but not because I am a girl.** Galatians is where we also find the fruits of the Spirit recorded – the things we all want in our lives – love, peace, joy, patience,

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is an old tale that people come from everywhere to buy those fruits, but we can only buy the seeds: we must plant seeds of love, acceptance, freedom and assurance for all in order to grow and enjoy the fruits of the Spirit for ourselves.\* Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Insist on yourself, never imitate." My challenge to each of you for this summer is to have the courage to **be the way** in which "an Other" – some person very different from you – someone who perhaps makes you uncomfortable or even frightens you = comes to feel more loved and truly free to be the person God created him or her to be. AMEN. **\*(free to be me slide repeat)**