

Freedom

Sermon by Rev. Karen Nyhart

July 1, 2018

Galatians 5:1, 13-14

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”¹³ 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.¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Well this is the weekend leading into the 4th of July – Independence Day – the day we celebrate with family and friends.

The day we have picnics, parades, wear red, white and blue, and watch fireworks.

(This is photo of our Early Educations Center having their 4th of July bike parade.)

4th of July is the day we celebrate the adoption of the Declaration of Independence - Our freedom from the British Empire and rule – free to be our own country with our own rules and laws.

When I was growing up, we had 4th of July traditions that we did every year.

My Dad always put out the American flag first thing in the morning.

Then we would always go to our friend’s house down by the river and celebrate with a picnic, a bonfire, and watching fireworks in the evening.

Somewhere during day, we would also watch the movie, “Yankee Doodle Dandy”.

The holiday was not complete without it.

Yankee Doodle Dandy is a movie about the life of George M. Cohan.

(By the way, the Adult Council will be showing this movie as a part of their Summer Movie series on July 15.)

Cohan was an American entertainer that wrote musicals, sang, acted, danced, produced and composed songs such as “You’re a Grand Old Flag”, “Over There” and “Yankee Doodle”.

A statue of him is in Time Square to commemorate his contribution to American Theatre.

We ran across it on our New York trip in April.

The movie starts with George (played by James Cagney) coming out of retirement to star in a musical as President Roosevelt.

After Cohan’s opening night, he is called to meet Roosevelt at the White House.

The President presented him with the Congressional Gold Medal.

He is overwhelmed and begins talking to Roosevelt about his family and career on stage.

At a very early age, George and his sister joined his Mom and Dad doing Vaudeville acts.

They were known as – “The 4 Cohans”.

They were pretty successful, until George got a little too arrogant and self-centered.

Soon, George was blacklisted by theatrical producers for being too troublesome. The family soon discovers that they cannot find work.

He over hears his Dad telling someone that he will not break up the family act to find work.

George is a part of their family and they will stay together.

It is at that moment we see George changing from being an arrogant self-centered individual to a caring, loving, unselfish person – from being inward focused to outward focus.

George insisted that the family find work without him and that he is going to go out on his own.

He really didn’t have any opportunities at that time, but he didn’t want his family out of work.

We soon find that George does make it on his own and is doing very well.

He persuades his parents to join his act, he helps them financially and he even makes them partners of his production company.

At the end of the movie, he accepts the Congressional Gold Medal for his patriotic music and for instilling citizens with a loyal and patriotic spirit.

George thanks the President by saying,

“I want you to know that I'm not the only one that's grateful. My mother thanks you, my father thanks you, my sister thanks you, and I assure you, I thank you.”

George had the freedom to choose how he wanted to live his life and how he wanted to treat those around him.

He chose to change his outlook on life – to show love to those around him and to be grateful for the life he had.

He chose to include others on his journey through life and not to go it alone.

The Apostle Paul addresses freedom in the letter he wrote to the Galatian Church.

Paul knew the people in Galatia.

He was there on his missionary journey and had started churches there.

He knew these new Gentile Christians and cared deeply for them.

It wasn't long after one of his visits that other teachers arrived telling these new Christians that they had to follow the Jewish laws and customs.

These laws were strictly religious laws and not laws of the country.

Galatia was under Roman authority.

Paul had been arguing with traditional teachers before who wanted to have the new Gentile Christians placed under the strict requirements of the old Jewish laws and customs.

When Paul heard that that this was happening in Galatia, he was extremely upset.

Paul believed that Christ had set them free.

Galatians 5:1 says, *“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”*

He didn't think that being free depended on whether you were obeying the Jewish rules and customs.

They were free because they believed in Jesus Christ.

Faith is not work based and dependent about how much you do.

However, Paul does tell them to not use their freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but instead to serve one another out of love.

Here these words from Galatians 5 in the version from The Message:

Galatians 5:13-14 says,

“It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom.”

We have a choice in how we are going to live our lives.

We have the freedom to live our lives for our own self-interest – gain what we can, do our own thing, be in this life for ourselves.

Or we can choose to live our lives for others – sharing what we have, helping a neighbor in need, treating people the way we want to be treated.

A couple of weeks ago my sister in-law, Michelle and I were at a Church Conference in Wichita.

(Michelle was a member here at Old Mission before she moved to Leavenworth. She even got married in this church.)

That Saturday morning, they were having a 5K that was attached to this Conference called, “Therefore Go”.

Now it was a run/walk 5K.

Michelle and I decided to go and participate.

We started off and we were doing “pretty” good.

But, then as we past this one man, he said, “You don’t have to worry about being last. I am always last.”

I thought for a moment – did I hear him correctly. I said, “What did you say?” He said, “Oh, you don’t have to worry about being last. I always come in last.”

We did end up passing him, but I kept thinking about what he said.

This 5K was also just a few days after Vacation Bible School, so all I could think about was that we are united: We are better together.

Michelle and I talked and we both decided that we could not let him be last. Not this time.

When we got to the halfway point, we stayed at the water station until the man arrived.

We started walking with him and carrying on a conversation with him.

We found out that his name was Marvin, that he was from the Wichita area, he heard about this 5K and decided to do it.

We had a wonderful conversation with him about his family, his faith and about his fiancé.

As we came towards the finish line we told him, “We are going to finish this together. No one is going to be last today.”

And we did.

We all walked through the finish line together.

You see Michelle and I had the freedom to pass Marvin up and finish the 5K without him – and in reality, he probably would have been okay with that.

We also had the freedom to stay with him – get to know him a little bit better and to finish the race with him.

Marvin also had the freedom to get ahead of us at the end and finish before us too, but he didn’t.

He stayed with us and we all finished the 5K together.

This story reminds me of another story about Michelle when she was just out of high school.

Michelle, her Dad and siblings climbed Long’s Peak which is a 14,000-foot mountain in Colorado.

As they were hiking up it, her Dad started to get tired, so he told his kids to go ahead.

He didn’t want to hold them back and he wanted them to reach the summit and get all the way to the top of the mountain.

He gave them the freedom to go on ahead without him.

He may have been wondering at the time if he was even going to make it to the top.

So, his kids did go on ahead – all of them except Michelle.

She chose to stay behind with her Dad – to keep him company and walk with him up the mountain.

Together they kept hiking up that mountain until they reached the top - together.

You see, Michelle had the freedom to go on ahead and she had the freedom to stay.

Even at a young age, she knew that life was better together – that no one should go through life alone.

So, how do you know if you are making those decisions to live an outward life instead of an inward life?

A life that shows we are living a life of love?

The Apostle Paul ends Galatians chapter 5 with a wonderful road map to help us know if we are living a life of love.

Here these words:

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.²⁶ Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

Whenever, we make the decision to be joyful, or patient, or kind – like Paul described, then we know we are on the right track to living a life of love.

God has also given us the Holy Spirit to guide us and direct us on our path in life.

As we approach the 4th of July, spend some time thinking of what freedom means for you.

How do you define it in your life?

Freedom does means that we can do whatever we want, whenever we want.

It also means that we can treat people however we want to treat them.

But, true freedom – freedom through Christ - means that we are to serve one another, treat each other with respect, help each other, and love one another.

We all have different ideas and opinions, but that doesn't mean we can't walk together.

We can still find things that bring us together - that unites us as one.

George M. Cohan learned that life is better together.

The Apostle Paul taught this to the church in Galatia – that we are to serve one another in love.

Michelle, Marvin and I learned this on our 5K and Michelle and her Dad learned this on their hike up Long's Peak.

Life is better together.

It is better when life is shared together, when we truly listen to one another, when we treat each other with respect, when we help one another, and when we choose love above everything else.

When we do these things, we are then able to show others what true freedom looks like.

Amen.