

Free for What?

Galatians 5:13

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

July 3, 2001

In the movie *Braveheart* there is a scene in which William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, rallies the warriors of various Scottish clans with a cry of "Freedom! Freedom!" Afterwards one of his lieutenants says, "That was a great speech, but now what do we do?" After the fireworks, after the parade, then what? What are we free *for*?

If I could put one verse on a banner over our celebration of the Fourth of July, it would be Galatians 5:13, "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." (NRSV). You hear in that verse two understandings of freedom. One way of understanding freedom is that we have been set free to serve one another in love. The competing idea is that we have been set free to indulge ourselves.

You can answer for yourselves which is the dominant American understanding of freedom. Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all people "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In the popular understanding, liberty is equated with the pursuit of happiness. The Christian has to say "NOT GOOD ENOUGH." Jefferson's view of the human situation was a common one in the eighteenth century and a common one in Greek and Roman philosophy. Epictetus' definition of freedom in the first century is one many Americans would be comfortable with: "He is free who lives as he wills, who is subject neither to compulsion, nor hindrance, nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end" (*Diss.* 4.1.1.).

The sociologist Robert Bellah wrote in the 1985 best seller *Habits of the Heart*, based on interviews with everyday Americans, "Freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value... Yet freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people's values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life. What it is that one might *do* with that freedom is much more difficult for Americans to define" [p. 23]. If freedom means nothing more than doing what I want, then it hardly seems like something noble worth celebrating this weekend.

In fact, if freedom is defined as doing what I want, being in control of my own life, that sounds pretty close to what Christians have always called **sin**. The essence of sinfulness is absolute autonomy, seeking to be in complete control, the sovereign of my own life, cutting myself off from God so that I won't have to submit to God's control. William Temple said that what the Bible means by sin is "self-centeredness." Luther talked about our sinful nature as "man curved in on himself." Malcolm Muggeridge wrote about "the dark little dungeon of my own ego." John Stott, the great English evangelical preacher, said, "True freedom is freedom from my silly little self, in order to live responsibly in love for God and others."

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasizes three aspects of freedom: we are free from the self-righteousness, we are free from self-indulgence, and we are free to love.

Paul argues at great length that Christian believers are now free from the Jewish law. He means not that we are free from moral law but that we have been set free from the hopeless task of becoming good enough to please God. We have already been made right with God through what Jesus did for us on the cross, so why would we want to jump back onto the hamster-wheel of self-righteousness? This was Paul's personal story, of course, the perfect religious man who had to lose his religion in order to believe in Jesus. For Paul, there is no going back to the idea that he had to try very very hard to be a good boy and maybe God would accept him. For Paul, the secret was out: God has *already* accepted us. It's not in our hymnal, but Baptist hymnals still include an old Sunday School song from 1873 called "Free from the Law, O Happy Condition." The second stanza begins "Now we are free, there's no condemnation, Jesus provides a perfect salvation" [Philip Bliss]. It's something worth singing about, even if it sounds corny to our modern ears.

The idea that we are free from the law was a key issue for the families who came to settle Block Island 350 years ago. I'm reading the biography of Ann Hutchinson, *American Jezebel*, because it seems likely that the first settlers here were followers of Ann Hutchinson and originally left Boston because of her condemnation by the Puritans. For Hutchinson, the standard view of the Boston clergy that whether you were saved—that is, whether you were among the elect—had to be proven by your *works* amounted in practice to saying that you were saved by your works. She taught the doctrine of grace, that God's mercy was unilateral and could be seen chiefly in the heart experience of those who received it. I think Paul would be on Ann's side against the clergy who kicked her out.

But this is not to say—as the editorial in the current *Block Island Times* says—that freedom means "pursuing health and happiness unencumbered by church or state." That radical view of humans as autonomous, free from church and state, is the view of another "Ann," spelled Ayn, Ayn Rand, the atheist patron saint of libertarians. A Christian like Ann Hutchinson would say that there is a proper role for church and state—they just shouldn't be trying to control each other. Ayn Rand would say that the free individual has no obligation to anyone but herself, and that religion which tries to promote such obligations makes one weak and should be rejected. That is close to what the apostle Paul calls being controlled by the flesh—radical selfishness.

Paul's second characterization of freedom in Galatians is that it means freedom from self-indulgence. What we were trapped in before we learned of Christ was the prison of me, myself, and I. We could not get beyond our own desires and were locked into being selfish. Jesus through his Spirit has now set us free from that self-centeredness, Paul says. But the danger in the church is that those who understand that they are free from the law will decide that they are free from ethical demands altogether.

Most of you know I am a former Southern Baptist and engaged in a kind of defensive warfare against fundamentalist religion for years. I left the Southern Baptists for a breakaway group called the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. This week a founder of that group, a church history professor named Walter Shurden, issued a warning on its 20th anniversary. The headline read **"CBF founder says freedom movement must avoid 'sloppy discipleship.'"** Shurden defined "sloppy" discipleship as that which "worships when it is convenient, reads its Bible if it has time, tips God rather than tithes to the kingdom" and "fails to engage in a kind of Christlike generosity that nudges us toward sacrifice." [Associated Baptist Press, 6-30-11]. Is it possible that he is describing Harbor

Church as well? Have we in the name of freedom from the law slid toward self-indulgence?

Way back in 1973 psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a bestseller titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* More people quoted the title than read the book, but the core of his argument was that the word “sin” since the Victorian period had become so linked to sexual misbehavior and in particular to the “secret sin” of self-stimulation or autoeroticism (I’m using words that the children won’t understand!) that when people decided that there was really nothing wrong with *that* they concluded on some level that there was nothing wrong with *sin*.

Among socially progressive evangelicals, we could say the same thing about alcohol. Some of us grew up thinking that drinking was *the* great sin, under the influence of the temperance movement which placed Rebecca in front of our church. When we discovered that for many people drinking can be harmless and—worse—that *Jesus* drank and the Bible even *commends* drinking at points—we pretty much decided that anything goes. Not only will I drink to prove I’m not a fundamentalist; I won’t speak badly of any other form of self-indulgence either.

Paul stands solidly against all of that. He lays out the deeds that characterize the old sinful self-indulgent nature in Galatians 5, beginning with fornication and including drunkenness and arguing in church. The good news is that we have been set free from all of that. Jesus didn’t die on the cross to give us permission to be naughty and self-indulgent. He died so that we could be changed into people who are free to love.

That’s the purpose of freedom for Paul. The purpose is love. We are freed from the self-righteousness and self-indulgence that keep us from loving. Jesus’ goal for his followers is not to create people who are simply free from religion. His goal for us is to make us like himself—redemptive lovers, to make us what Bonhoeffer called Jesus: “a man for others.”

Not long ago we watched the movie *Invictus* about Nelson Mandela (played perfectly by Morgan Freeman) and the national rugby team of South Africa. Think about Mandela being locked up for 27 years, 18 of them in that small solitary cell at Robben Island. Looking at that cell is what moves the Matt Damon character, the captain of the rugby team. We are reminded in the film that when Nelson Mandela experienced freedom and became president, he refused to use it as an opportunity for revenge, even though he had the power of the government at his disposal. He refused to indulge his own anger. He refused to live according to his lower nature and continue partisan or racial bickering. Instead he chose to use his freedom to love. He chose to use his freedom to seek reconciliation and forgiveness and healing.

We who have been set free by Jesus have the same choice. Will we use our freedom to indulge our own passions, or will we use our freedom to serve others in love?