

Rev. Dr. Terry Schmitt

August 25, 2019

Romans 7: 15 - 25a

Galatians 5: 1, 13 - 25

Freedom All the Way

I kind of divide sermons into two classes: ones that are about what God has done for us, like love and grace, and ones that are about what we are supposed to do in response, like faith and action. This is definitely one of the latter type, and it is going to start off with a long story as an illustration of the main point. It's a story that involves both me and Judy, so she can correct anything here that might be fuzzy, but it happened back when we were in high school, and that was an amazingly long time ago, even if some of it seems like yesterday.

Judy and I were on the student newspaper when we were in high school, and one time, we had the chance to publish a really important, powerful, story. To be honest, the story fell into our laps, and it was a sad story, in many ways, because it was about the murder of another kid in our school and the failure of anyone to come forward with helpful evidence. As I say, it was a shocking and powerful story, and we treated it as if it were important and special, which it was.

Now, as teenagers on a school newspaper, we were pretty full of ideas that are near and dear to our nation, in this case, the freedom of the press. We knew we could publish our story without telling anyone in the administration ahead of time, and we did. We were very aware that we were free from any school administration imposed rules: we were free, in our minds, in the way that most teenagers think of freedom: we were free from rules and could do what we wanted. So, we did a bang-up job of being secretive and careful, so that when our story hit the halls of the school, it would cause a sensation. Which it did. A big one.

As teenagers, we were pretty full of ourselves, and pleased with what we did, which is to say, we really didn't think about the impact of this story on anybody else. (Unholy trinity of teenagers: me myself, and I) But, of course, it was a big story, and it had a big impact, even on people we could barely imagine. It was supposed to rattle people and get them to tell the truth. It definitely rattled people, but sadly, did not induce the hoped-for truth telling.

But the rattling part worked like a charm. I will never forget the request from the superintendent's office on the day after the newspaper came out, that, if we could spare the time from our busy schedules, could we drop in for a few minutes for a friendly chat with our superintendent. I don't think the call was phrased exactly like that, but, ah, we got the idea. It wasn't as if this was going to be a long trek, either, since his office was right next door to the newspaper's.

So we went. And I was very surprised, and more than a bit chastened, by what the superintendent said to us. The murder had been hard enough on people in the school, but what the story implied was that young people were wandering around the schools with information, or even that they were participants in the killing. So when school parents saw the article late in the

day, several angry and scared parents called the superintendent at his home to vent their concerns. And they called, and called, well into the night.

But he had known nothing about the article. So he was caught completely unprepared for the onslaught of phone calls. His meeting with us was fascinating, and instructive. He knew that we didn't have to get his approval for any of our articles, but he made a simple and, upon reflection, very reasonable request. If, in the future, we were about to publish an article that was likely to cause significant commotion, would we please have the courtesy to let him know a few hours in advance simply so that he could be prepared for what would happen? [Changed vantage point now after serving on the WH Board of Ed.]

Since we, as student newspaper editors, were free from rules about censorship, we hadn't really thought about what we were free for, such as helping prepare other people for the impact of our actions.

So here's the lesson I take from that experience: as human beings, especially as citizens of the United States, we know a lot about what it means to be free from things, and we celebrate and revel in that. But the full impact of our freedoms is to understand what we will be free for, as well as free from. Perhaps a short way to remember that is to assert that freedom from is about liberty, but for people of faith, freedom for is for God and God's works. Put another way: freedom from is often a political issue: freedom for ought to be a faith issue for people of the church.

My assertion (and Paul's, too) is that in order to be completely free, we have to be involved in both kinds of freedom. That's full freedom. In the case of our story, it wasn't enough to be freed from censorship. We could also have been freed for a little courtesy, and even, a little appreciation of parental fears.

I'm a big fan of freedom, and I suspect that most of us are, really. My favorite Norman Rockwell pictures address these issues, too. You probably know them. They're called, collectively, "The Four Freedoms," and they were created during the second World War by Rockwell in response to Pres. Franklin Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address. The point of the speech, and later of the pictures, was to make clear what was at stake for our nation and the world in that conflict.

Here are the ideas: Freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. If you don't know these images, you can look them up at any time on the internet, of course. But because we are privileged to live where we do, you can take the hour or so drive if you want to and go up to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and see the originals for yourself.

What I especially appreciate about the The Four Freedoms is that they offer that real and appropriate balance between freedoms from and freedoms for: there are two of each. Remember, they are Freedom from fear, Freedom from want, Freedom of speech, Freedom of religion. Two freedoms from bad things, and two freedoms "of" or "for" good things.

Because, as our teenage efforts in journalism demonstrated to me, it is immature to see freedom only halfway. It is immature for our faith lives, and it is immature for our political lives, too. We are not just free from things, either as faithful people or as citizens. We are not just free from

things if we are to live fully faithful lives. We are also freed for things, particularly freed for sharing the love of God in Christ Jesus. Unfortunately, it is easy to be immature and incomplete about this.

You see, it is often too easy to think that freedom is only about being free from things. When we were kids, we desperately wanted to be free, at least most of the kids I knew did. We wanted to be free from bedtimes, free from homework, free from household chores. We wanted to be free like we imagined adults were free -- from silly rules imposed on us by others at school, at home, even at church. It was all about being free from things we thought we didn't like, even if they were important or good for us. That was the way we defined freedom. It isn't much different, in many ways, the way that some people today say that want to be free from taxes -- they want to be free from taxes but they still want all the benefits of roads, schools, police, fire departments, and so on. People can talk freedom from pretty easily. Even within the most sacred parts of our faith, we can focus on being freed from guilt, without considering very much what being freed from the power of sin frees us for.

What are we free for? We almost never think about that part when we use the word freedom, but freedom from is only half the equation. What are we free for is what a mature faith invites us to consider.

Paul writes to a church in Galatia that is all filled up with freedom, especially the freedom from a lot of problems and issues, both personal issues and larger social issues. And he gives them a long list of things to be free from -- fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, and so on -- it is a pretty typical Pauline list, and might make us feel -- like Paul himself feels in the first letter we read to the church at Rome -- as if we know we aren't ever going to live up to this list. But that really isn't the point.

The point Paul is seeking to make is that the freedom from God gives us through the Christ event has a purpose -- it is to free us for the Godly work of real love in the world. Paul calls that "the fruit of the Spirit." It's the other half of freedom, to be freed for love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness -- and so on. I like that Pauline list better. It gives us a sense of full freedom.

Freedom for God's good: is creative, instead of reactionary.

It is giving, instead of selfish.

It is loving, instead of fearful.

It doesn't use freedom to run away from problems, but uses freedom to face up to them.

It builds up instead of tears down.

It is a gift from God. It is in each one of us, if we search for it.

So I told you that this was that second kind of sermon — the kind about how we as faithful people are invited, urged, recommended. (Notice I am not saying, “ordered”) to respond to all the incredible gifts of life, love, and grace that God has showered upon us. That response is what invites us, not to use the freedom we have in Christ into selfish license, but instead, into full freedom for God’s will in the world. For love, for responsibility, for understanding, even for the basic decent courtesy that might have made life a lot easier for the poor superintendent back when Judy and I published that story. In short, we are freed from the power of sin, but we are freed for, well, for the good that God knows that we can do.

Amen.

© 2019 Rev. Dr. Terry Schmitt, all rights reserved.

Romans 7: 15 - 25

15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.

17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,

23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then with my mind, I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh, I am a slave to the law of sin.

Galatians 5:1, 13 - 25

1. 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."

15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,

20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,

21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 By contrast, 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.