

A Spirit of Freedom and Fruitfulness

*A sermon preached on Galatians 5:1, 13-25 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on June 30, 2019*

I.

For just a brief stopover this week, our family had the gift to celebrate my parents upon the occasion of their 40th wedding anniversary. Their actual anniversary was a couple of weeks ago, but they happened to be passing through Winston-Salem on their way up north for a trip and paused for a night with us. Forty years deserves a real celebration, and until we can get a larger crew together to do that, I used this night as a time for modest merriment. I figured an occasion like this one deserved a good toast, so I went hunting for a pair of champagne flutes given to Josh and me upon the occasion of our wedding nine years ago.

I don't think I had forgotten this, but surely it was not in my mind until I saw it in my mother's hand. For inscribed on the side of one of the glasses was a lyric from a favorite song of mine by the folk duo the Indigo Girls which said this: "the closer I'm bound in love to you, the closer I am to free." There, with the magic of a summer night all around us — the fireflies, the squealing kids, the music, the memory — the challenge extended past the boundaries of even the deepest relationship to call me to the world: "the closer I'm bound in love to you (and you, and you, and you!), the closer I am to free."

II.

You might just say that the Indigo Girls have been reading Galatians, right? Because this call echoes precisely the same themes of Paul proclaims passionately to the fledgling young church at Galatia. "For freedom Christ

has set us free!,” Paul writes to the young church. “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Those Galatians remembered the slavery of old, the bondage of the former gods that demanded their idolatry now freed with God’s unbridled love of them and unconditional grace for them in Christ. They heard the rumblings of Jewish authorities that would demand they be circumcised before being fully welcomed into the faith. But here Paul is clear – while freedom means liberation from the forces that enslave us, it does not mean liberation from the relationships to which we should be bound. To those Gentiles new to the faith, Paul says “you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only don’t use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence – for “unrestrained permission to do whatever you please”¹ – but *through love become slaves to one another.*” What God asked of them for such boundless welcome was love in return and response, the kind of love that sets us free by binding us up.

Paul’s playing with speech, of course, dynamically splicing images of freedom and liberation and independence with bondage and slavery and interdependence. It’s as if Paul is saying that to those of us who worship the crucified and resurrected Christ, that the freedom we have is freedom to love. Period! It’s the freedom to love, freedom for the sake of love, freedom so that we can boldly and boundlessly love without reservation. Love binds,

¹ Great quote from Robert A. Bryant’s commentary, “Galatians 5:1, 13-25,” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p187.

which means that when we see someone suffering or hurting or in need, we must do something about it – otherwise it's not love.²

III.

The irony, of course, is that Paul is writing to this young church about what would later become some of the foundational tenets of our faith, our Christian tradition, our religion. It's ironic because the word 'religion' comes from the Latin *ligare*, which means 'to bind together'.³ Yet how many of us have felt at odds with our religious tradition and those who practice it? How many of us have felt hemmed in or unfairly judged, stifled or imprisoned by some in our Christian family to which we are to be bound? How many of us have wondered how in the world we'll find common ground, how to unite with others who are different – either within our own religious tradition, or simply outside our own tradition? And particularly this time of year, how many of us feel the tension of freedom: freedom we celebrate in our country and the freedom we're given in love through Christ, a citizenship in America and our citizenship within the kingdom of God. How often do we wonder which receives the pledge of our highest allegiance?

For **in a day** when the political machine and all its subsidiaries profit on our relentless division and polarization... **in an age** when fear would trick us into believing that we should hate and devalue our enemies instead of loving them... **in a time** when we who are miles of physical and emotional space away from our country's border can turn away while the countless many

² Thanks to Pulpit Fiction podcast for this week's helpful conversation about freedom and love. You can find it here: <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper8c>.

³ As referenced by J. William Harkins in "Galatians 5:1, 13-25," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, p186.

suffer and die... **in a place** where the moral fabric of this land that is your land and my land is tearing at the seam... **in a moment** when the loudest Christian witness so often contains the blustering voices of abuse or patriarchy, racism or compliance with those in power... **in a season** when we talk more about the decay of truth than the truth that sets us free...

For such a time as this, my friends, I am convinced that there has rarely in our history been a more critical need for those who claim Christ to cry out and proclaim in word and deed the good news: “for freedom Christ has set us free! ... You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters! Not for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another! ... Love your neighbor as yourself! Live by the Spirit, be guided by the Spirit, bear fruit of the Spirit!” For the closer I’m bound in love to you, the closer we all are to freedom!

Because if we are living in such a way that we exercise our freedom, not as a blank check to do whatever we want, but rather freedom as a holy covenant for the purpose of love of neighbor, then the natural outgrowth of such freedom IS in the fruit we bear! Not fruits, plural, but the fruit that Paul tells us is of the Spirit. You remember the list, right? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. This is the fruit of that freedom! So how then are we who claim Christ to live in that freedom and fruitfulness?

If I — if we — experience a person whose station in life presses them outside of the commonly-held circle inclusion — because of their background, their education, their race or nationality, their sexual orientation, their worldview — and I do not share **love**, then I am held captive

to my sense of right and wrong or my nostalgia for how things used to be, not my Christ.

If I miss the morning birdsong echoing around my backyard, the squeal of a child, the beauty of one caring for another, the grace and mercy that never fails to cover me when I least deserve it, and I do not express **joy**, then I am held captive to my distractions and dissatisfactions, not my Christ.

If I hold tight to my weapons of security, my alarms and ammunition against anything that could possibly threaten my family's well-being, or way of life, or commitments, or worldview, and I do not lead with **peace**, then I am held captive by my fear, not my faith.

If I dismiss another who is awakening me however uncomfortably to my privilege, my advantages, my upper hand in this life *so that I may live transformed*, and I do not demonstrate **patience**, then I am held captive to my ego, not Christ.

If I have the opportunity to feed the hungry, nourish the thirsty, welcome the immigrant, clothe the naked, and be with the sick and imprisoned, and I do not extend **kindness** with the least of these, then I am held captive to my comfort, not my Christ.

If I spend all the money I have on things to thrill and seduce, if I use what I have simply to keep myself afloat, if I save, stash, and stockpile to hoard what I have today so that I don't go without tomorrow, and I do not practice **generosity**, then I am held captive to what I have, not to the One from whom all blessings flow.

If I play fast and loose with the truth, if I forget to whom I belong, if I pledge my allegiance first to anything or anyone other than the kingdom of

God in Christ, and I do not devote myself to **faithfulness**, then I am held captive by my loyalty to self or tribe than fidelity to the body of Christ.

If I am led by the assumptions I make of others, if my temper flares with what I perceive to be a slight, if I find myself consumed by envy over another's success or pride in my own, and I do not respond with **gentleness** to another or myself, then I am held captive by myself, my ego, my No, rather than the Holy Yes, and the Ones to whom I am called to become subject.

If I let the instability of the world cause my anxiety to govern my reactions, if I submit to lure of the screen, the sale, the substance, the seduction, or the success, if I let the things I want guide the things I do, and I do not exercise **self-control**, then I am held captive by my individual hungers and not the communal feast to which we all are invited.

*For if I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. For love? **Love never fails.***

IV.

I've shared with you before the stories of Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries out in East Los Angeles, California, the largest gang intervention, rehab, and re-entry program in the world. For the thousands they serve each year (more than 7000 in 2018!), Father Boyle recalls the words of Mother Teresa, and her diagnosis of the world's ills: 'we've just

forgotten that we belong to each other.’ “But kinship,” Father Boyle says, “is what happens to us when we refuse to let that happen.”⁴

Radical kinship is among the highest of values for Homeboy Industries, the fruit of the Spirit, where stories of love are more numerous than all the felonies and mishaps and bad decisions you might list. That kinship is what Father Boyle heard when he met Jermaine, as he described “a sturdy African-American gang member [who] came to see me released after more than twenty years in prison. His demeanor is gentle and so, so kind,” Father Boyle remembers. He asks Jermaine if he’s on parole, to which Jermaine responds, ‘Yes - high control.’ “I hope you don’t mind me asking this,” Father Boyle says, “but how did someone as kind and gentle and tender as you end up ... on high-control parole?” After a long pause, Jermaine offers with a bit of a wink: “rough childhood?”

They laugh together, as Jermaine begins to tell Father Boyle of what he’s experienced: his mom’s years as a prostitute, his father’s murder when Jermaine was nine, his mother’s meltdown after the funeral where she took him and his two younger brothers to an apartment, left them there, closed the door, and never returned. Jermaine recalled how after his mom left, he and his brothers would sit on the stoop of their neighbors’ porches, and when the neighbors would ask what they were doing, Jermaine would respond: “We ain’t leaving ‘till you feed us.” As their conversation wound to a close that day, Jermaine said to Father Boyle: “I’ve decided to be loving and kind in the world. Now...I’m just hopin’ ... the world will return the favor.”⁵

⁴ As quoted by Father Greg Boyle in his book *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, p187.

⁵ Father Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, p4-5.

In remembering stories like Jermaine's and so many more that would split your heart wide open: "I eventually learned that shaking one's fist at something doesn't change it," Father Boyle said. "Only love gets fists to open."⁶ For freedom Christ has set us free! And in that freedom, become slaves to one another. *The closer I'm bound in love to you, the closer I am to free!*

V.

This week, many of us will, once again, experience the rituals that mark our country's freedom celebrations. I bet there will be magical summer nights this week, where we'll light sparklers, overcook the hamburgers, and hang up the flag. We may take advantage of holiday sales and travel for a long weekend away. And amidst the fun, I hope we'll sing some freedom songs and remember with abiding gratitude all the people whose lives and work and dedication and commitments have made possible the myriad of freedoms we enjoy today.

But as we do... as we remember freedom and give thanks for independence, might we remember our *interdependence*? As we give thanks for freedom, might we remember the freedom that binds us up in love with one another? As we remember the freedom of our country, might we remember the freedom we have in Christ, freedom that opens fists and binds people and bears fruit in love?

For the closer I'm bound in love to you (and you, and you, and you), the closer I am, and we are!, to free.

Amen!

⁶ Ibid, p6.