

The Rev. Anne Turner  
June 26, 2022 (Proper 8 C)  
Galatians 5:1, 13-25  
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

What does it mean to be free?

I've been thinking a little bit about this question since Juneteenth, which was last Sunday, June 19. Juneteenth marks not the day that slavery was ended in this country—but rather the day that the news got out there to everyone. Two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, a Union Army general finally rode into Galveston, Texas and declared the freedom of the enslaved people there.

And I've been thinking a lot about this question since Friday's Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe versus Wade. Depending on where you live now, you may be able to have an abortion, or you may not. What had been a constitutional freedom is not one anymore.

These moments in time raise legal questions about freedom. When were those black people in Galveston actually free, during those two and a half years? If you have a right in one situation but not another, how real is that right? These legal questions lead me to existential ones. Do you have to know you're free to be free? Do other people have to believe it, or just you? What part do the people around you have in granting you your freedom? Can you just claim it for yourself? How do you get free? How do you stay free?

In a very different context, Paul is asking these questions of the Galatians this morning. He is talking about freedom metaphorically, but no less urgently. His world is the world of early Christianity and its relationship to the laws of Judaism. And he is so frustrated that the church in Galatia heard the good news and then forgot it. He is frustrated that the church has lost its freedom.

You might notice that the lectionary cuts out a bunch of verses here—and if you go back and read them, you understand a little more of Paul's frustration. The backstory: Paul at one point came and taught these people that there is no barrier to new life in Christ. Gentiles did not need to convert to Judaism before becoming Christian, and they did not need to be circumcised or follow Old Testament law or jump through any kind hoops on their way to Jesus. They were free.

But, evidently, the Galatians hadn't remembered. Or hadn't believed. Or hadn't trusted. It sounds from the letter like some of them were hedging their bets, and some of them were putting pressure on one another to conform. Clearly, some of the men were getting circumcised, and it seems like some of the community was trying to lay down the Jewish law.

And it makes Paul crazy. He has told them that they are safe. And they are acting afraid. He has announced their freedom. And they have walked back into this little cage.

Very few of us get tied in knots anymore about conformity to ritual laws. But we do still have cages. We do still ignore our freedom. Instead of the yoke of the law that Paul talks about weighing us down, we might talk about internalized misogyny, or internalized racism. We might talk about the systems in our culture that enshrine and perpetuate injustice. We might talk about any of the forces in this world that make us believe we are smaller than we are, or weaker than we are, or bound where we could in fact be liberated. I find myself negotiating with the rest of the world: how much of my identity can you tolerate? How much freedom will you let me have?

My freedom is not negotiable, because it comes from the human dignity given by Jesus Christ. The same is true of you. The same is true of every human being.

I have to be careful at this point, because it may sound like it's up to you to earn your freedom and it's your fault if you don't have it. That's not true. Ask anyone with alcoholism or mental illness to talk to you about the choice to be free, and you will hear a very complex story. And I am keenly aware that saying you should just free yourself when you have a literal shackle on your wrist is cheap and shallow.

So we need to be precise. Paul here is talking about the spiritual freedom, which runs at a soul level, not a political level. And he is not asking us here to *earn* our own freedom. Jesus Christ has done that. But he is asking us to *know* our own freedom. He is asking us to cultivate our freedom by constantly calling it to mind. He is telling us to *practice* our freedom.

So how do we do that?

Paul shows us something of a paradox here. Because the first thing he does after talking about freedom is to start talking about relationship: "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." It's a little hard for me to hear the language of slavery, but I think what Paul is trying to get at is the way we are tied to one another in this massive group project known as life.

Some of those ties are obvious. We need to balance our individual freedoms with the freedom of the group—any civics class will teach you that.

But, more deeply and more paradoxically, we need to rely on the other people around us to give us back who we are. We don't depend on someone else to *set* us free—my interior freedom is not hostage to your belief about me. But—and this is an important but—you do have the power to remind me that I am free. Perhaps, if you love me, if we love one another, this is our mutual responsibility: to encourage one another. To exhort one another. To remind one another of the truth so we can keep going. And to use our inward and spiritual freedom to work for freedom that is outward and visible.

Our job is to live as free people, and our job is to help one another live as free people.

Who are the people you can trust to hold up a faithful mirror to the truth of you? Who are the people who know your real identity, the implanted image of God in your soul? Who can show you the picture when you need to see it? I think I can speak for my fellow clergy when I saw this is something we want to do: to remind you of the true self you have, a self that has been freed by Jesus Christ. We want you to remember who you are at your deepest level and who it is that you can be.

But we are not the only ones in your life doing this, I hope. Take some time this morning to take stock: who are the trustworthy messengers in your life? Who tells you the truth about who you are, about what you can do? Who help you be that person, and do those things?

Stand firm, Paul says. Stand firm for your freedom. We do that not by standing alone but by standing together. We come to know ourselves and the liberation Jesus Christ has given us by standing with the people who remind us every single day of who we are and who God is for us.

For freedom Christ has set us free. This is who we are, and this is who I hope will be, and this is what I hope we will work towards becoming.