Children's Sermon

Do you know what this coming Friday is all about? 4th of July? We celebrate the United States' birthday! We're 249 years old! That's even older than I am!

People on TV will be talking about freedom. Do you know what freedom is?

Let me tell you a story about freedom.

A long time ago, before your were born, when your mom and dad were about your age, and our sons were about your age, we got a rescue dog. Do you know what a rescue dog is?

We went to the pound where they keep dogs that don't have a home… They keep them in cages, and they're pretty sad. So we chose a dog and rescued her. We named her Ginger…

She was so glad to be out of that cage! She was free! And when we got her home she was so happy she went nuts! She jumped up on us, got on the furniture, pottied on the floor, dug holes in the flower beds, barked and howled all night, etc.

She was so happy to be free from that cage and thought she could do whatever she wanted. But she was being destructive, and we had to teach her that was wrong.

In the Bible a man named Paul wrote a letter to some churches and said, "Jesus has set you free; but you're not free to do anything you want. You're not free to be destructive. Instead, you should use your freedom to love each other. That way, we all can be free.

Invitation to the Table

On this Freedom and Democracy Sunday I think of two statements. The first is in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

“The pursuit of happiness." By this, Jefferson didn’t intend a hedonistic, self-centered personal pleasure. He was Scottish, influenced by Francis Hutcheson, the father of the Scottish Enlightenment, who believed everyone's ultimate goal in life is happiness, and he found the deepest happiness in making others happy.

Haven't you found that to be true? Seeing your child open a gift? Those videos of children around the world opening those shoe boxes we send at Christmas?

The second statement is in HEBREWS 12:2: "...looking to Jesus… who for the joy set before him endured the cross ..." It seems strange to include joy in the same phrase as enduring the cross but it’s true: when Jesus was on the cross he was in " pursuit of happiness"—the happiness of forgiven sin, of cleansing and reconciliation and hope.

It’s still a mystery. For 2,000 years Christians have been arguing about how his death on the cross accomplished all of that.

At this table we don’t try to explain it. We simply celebrate it; and we experience again that joy set before us at His table.

Our Communion Hymn is #411, “For the Bread, Which You Have Broken.”

Pastoral Prayer

God, who Jesus called Father, we gather as your family—your children—to feast around your table. We come because we are hungry, and you have fed us. And you speak to us, but sometimes in words we don't fully comprehend; and when we do understand, your words are not always what we want to hear. But, like the prophets of Israel, your words are true and faithful, even when we don't want to hear.

Keep talking to us, gracious Lord. Keep working with us. Keep telling us the truth about ourselves and our world because our best hope is in your truth.

Keep on enabling those you call to speak to us, and some of us will hear and will respond. It won't be the same ones every time; so, use us in those moments when we are truly listening and ready to speak and act as you call us to do. And lead us to pray when it is others who hear and respond.

Strengthen us when we do your will so that when, like your prophets and your son, we meet with rejection and resistance, we will remain faithful.

Thank you for creating within humanity the gift of healing and thank you when we see healing enacted. Grant us patience when healing doesn't come as quickly as we'd like. You know our hearts; you know our desires. Grant us grace to be part of the healing process for each other.

In this hour of worship, hear our prayers, renew us, and make us aware of your presence and you empowering Spirit that are with us, now and always. Amen.

The Whole Law

GALATIANS 5:1, 13-25 (NRSVUE) *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 serve 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: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, [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 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.

The Word of God for the people of God!

The Sunday set aside to acknowledge the birth of our nation is often called "Freedom and Democracy Sunday." Freedom is a spiritual experience, not a political philosophy; and when I say it's spiritual I'm not restricting spirituality exclusively to Christianity. There are other spiritualities that promote and encourage freedom, and some elements of Christianity present obstacles to freedom.

The text Amy read is not true because it's in the New Testament; it's in the New Testament because it's true: "Christ has set us free!" But being in the Bible is not what makes any statement true. Truth is truth, whether it's in the Bible or not, and considering the trajectory of the whole biblical message, the measure of truth is not whether it's in the Bible, but whether it's Christlike. Christ is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." And Christ establishes the lens through which we read and understand the whole Bible.

Now, let's establish some parameters: don't confuse fact and truth. Something can be true even if it isn't fact; although, I can't think of any way a fact will not be true. And while absolute truth exists, limited as we are by the clay of which we are made, we humans are incapable of comprehending truth absolutely; that's why there are so many versions of truth floating around, and the issue is not that those versions are all wrong but that none of them is complete or absolute. "We see distorted images through a flawed pane of glass." (I Cor. 13:12)

But we humans resist accepting our limitations. We want absolutes; and so we tend to insist that our version of truth is absolute—there are no alternatives, and we couldn't possibly be wrong. That's why there is so much belligerence floating around claiming to be defending the Bible. What we're really doing is defending our

understanding of the Bible.

So, Paul says, "Christ has set us free." Let's put that to the test.

I have said "Freedom is a spiritual experience, not a political philosophy." Freedom and liberty frequently are used interchangeably, but there are subtle differences. Freedom generally refers to the absence of restraint or control, while liberty emphasizes the absence of arbitrary or unjust restrictions, particularly those imposed by authority. Freedom is closer to independence or autonomy, while liberty is more focused on the rights and privileges within a political system.

Humans are incapable of living in community without boundaries: The Ten Commandments; The Code of Hammurabi; The Beatitudes of Jesus; The Constitution of the United States. That's why we have to have rules and some system of governance; and thus far the perfect system hasn't been developed, and the best systems have not been applied with complete integrity. The lust for wealth and power have always skewed every human system away from its best ideals and values. Mahatma Gandhi is credited with the dictum, "Beware of the illusion that you can create a system so nearly perfect that nobody has to be good." And so, liberty is a relative thing, depending on how tight or how loose those boundaries are set and enforced.

In contrast, freedom, in its purest form, which probably doesn't exist in human experience, would have no socio/political boundaries imposed; in fact, freedom can be experienced and exercised in the most restrictive socio/political settings. As a spiritual experience, its boundaries are established by a different standard.

Paul writes, "Christ has set us free." And as he develops the idea he indicates what we're free "from," and what we're free "for." He also outlines some spiritual boundaries of freedom.

Like Ginger, our rescue dog, we have to put boundaries around our freedom. ***For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love serve one another.***

"Christ has set us free!" This is the core of Paul's message to the Galatian churches. God's liberating act in Christ frees them from the power of sin, law, and death. Therefore, he continues, "Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

The Galatian Christians were Greco/Roman—Gentiles, and Paul taught the law—specifically the Jewish purity laws—was not a legitimate path to God, because if you break one law one time, you're a lawbreaker and therefore excluded from a relationship with God. But a group within the Jerusalem church called Judaizers taught that only Jews could be Christians. That meant submitting to Jewish law, and the deal-breaker was circumcision.

Paul would go into an area and preach the gospel and establish a church and train pastors and elders and move on. The Judaizers would come in behind him and

tell the new Christians that Paul was leading them astray. They had to jump through Jewish legal hoops before they could be Christians; the men had to be circumcised, and it was creating controversy: who's right? Paul, or the Judaizers?

Paul got word of what was going on, and this letter is his response. "You foolish Galatians! Who has deceived you? Christ has set us free! Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery!" IN the first place, as a human you're not capable of keeping all the law all the time; therefore, every time you mess up you've got to do the dance and chant the liturgy and slaughter an animal. The law is a temporary fix, and the ongoing concern is getting everything right and.

"Christ has set us free!" Christ has shown us that God's grace acknowledges our human limitations and doesn't require keeping the law and being perfect. Grace does not require the impossible. When you mess up—and you will—in Christ we are free to simply repent: just turn around and get back on track.

The law is enslaving; retaliatory; punishing. It requires constant maintenance and demands our full attention. Christ frees us to focus, instead, on the spirit of the law. First Jesus said it; and now Paul reaffirms it: "***the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."***

The law creates fear: what happens when I get it wrong? How can I avoid the consequences. But Christ frees us to focus on the spirit of the law, which is love. Freedom overcomes fear. "Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Yesterday I found this wonderful quote from the late Walter Brueggemann, whose writings have helped me articulate my own faith and to move toward living it.

"The truth is that frightened people will never turn the world, because they use too much energy on protection of self. It is the vocation of the baptized, the known and named and unafraid, to make the world whole:

- "The unafraid are open to the neighbor, while the frightened are defending themselves from the neighbor.
- "The unafraid are generous in the community, while the frightened, in their anxiety, must keep and store and accumulate, to make themselves safe.
- "The unafraid commit acts of compassion and mercy, while the frightened do not notice those in need.
- "The unafraid are committed to justice for the weak and the poor, while the frightened see them only as threats.
- "The unafraid pray in the morning, care through the day, and rejoice at night in thanks and praise, while the frightened are endlessly restless and dissatisfied.

"So, dear people, each of you; do not fear! I have called you by name; you are mine!" (Words from Isaiah 43:1)

Paul wrote, "Christ has set us free!" Two generations later the Gospel of John would concur: *"…if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."* (JOHN 8:36)

Pray with me.