

Leviticus 19:11-18
Galatians 5:1,13-26

“Freedom’s Price”

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June 21, 2015

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Six years had passed since the end of the Revolutionary War. It had been eleven years since Thomas Jefferson ignited the torch of freedom by composing the Declaration of Independence for the 13 colonies. And now the leaders in this experiment for democracy were meeting again in Philadelphia during the hot, muggy summer of 1787 – nearly 228 years ago. The liberty they had declared with such fanfare - then struggled and fought to attain - seemed all but lost. The nation, like a burned out athlete at the end of its sprint for freedom, had used up all its energy and was wasting away.

The Articles of Confederation had not included provisions for a national army, nor had it raised enough funding to operate a nation. The colonies were in economic battle with each other, taxing goods as they were moved from one colony to another - because they were all in need of funding. Currency was a joke as inflation spiraled upward, and the colonial money wasn’t worth the paper it was printed on. Trade with Europe had declined to an all-time low after the Revolutionary War, which meant that all the colonies were suffering economic chaos.

So 35 representatives gathered from the colonies to see if they could hammer out a plan to save the colonies who were desperately trying to become a nation. Their object was to cease the self-destruction of pitting colony against colony and create a single nation in which freedom could still reign. But each of those 35 representatives had a little bit different perspective and take as to how liberty was to be established, and how freedom would look.

Some, like Patrick Henry of the famous, “Give me liberty or give me death” speech did not want to have anything to do with a central government.

b. In fact, he purposely stayed away from this meeting in Philadelphia, openly stating that he “smelled a rat.” Others, those who favored a strong central government – folks like James Madison, Ben Franklin, George Washington – were convinced that if enough safeguards, checks and balances could be given, that a Constitution could protect the freedom and liberty of all the people in each of the colonies.

So they met Hot debate filled that even hotter July air; ideas and convictions and beliefs were bantered about – all in an attempt to save the freedom that had so recently secured with bullets and blood and lives. These

delegates through their debate learned that month of July - if they had not already known before - that freedom costs – freedom always exacts a dear, dear price.

Yet freedom's price was nothing new or unique to the founding of this nation and the establishment of a Constitution. The Apostle Paul highlights the cost of freedom in his letter to the Galatians: "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" (5:13).

Now wait a minute – How can freedom and servitude – slavery - be used in the same sentence? Isn't that an oxymoron? What exactly is that kind of freedom? Is servitude freedom's price? How can that be?

To begin with, Paul would argue that freedom is not something that can be bought with silver or gold, but rather is a gift. We cannot manufacture freedom; we cannot produce it in a factory or a laboratory, or even construct it on some kind of political assembly line. We can only receive it and experience it. John Milton hit the mark when he wrote: "Liberty is to be sought from within rather than from without."

And that statement certainly applies to the freedom found in faith as well: Jesus is called a Savior – our Savior. Why? Because he delivers us from the bondage which is the consequence of our sin. He is the Emancipator who sets us free from our usual muddled ways of living. And that kind of freedom is first experienced on the inside.

Jesus knew and experienced freedom as a gift from God within, and he shared that gift of freeing forgiving grace to all who confess their sins, believe in him and follow him our Savior. But we can notice that the freedom Jesus possessed did not mean he had license to do exactly as he pleased. His freedom was found in constantly discerning the will of God so that "not my will, but your will be done," was his constant prayer. Thus his freedom was found and experienced in obeying the higher calling of God.

Again, it we will notice, Jesus did not muddle up his life with a list of "do's and don'ts." Jesus never raised his voice to declare, "I am my own person; I have my individual rights so I can do exactly as I please." Rather, he humbly obeyed God and the higher calling of serving – of 'emptying himself, taking on the form of a servant' – a slave actually' for the sake of others - and he did so as an expression of God's love and grace.

Perhaps you recall the account when Jesus confronted the high priest, Caiaphus, in the courtyard after Judas betrayed him. Caiaphus, the high priest, thought himself to be a free man. Yet, he was obeying all the human-constructed dietary and social behavior laws of the Jews. He carefully observed all the ritualistic cleansing regulations, making sure he was always ritually clean, constantly washing his hands. Caiaphus was schooled in and obedient to all the Pharisaic regulations, so that he would not touch and associate with others deemed as unclean.

But did attention to such strict legalism make Caiaphus truly free? We can surmise not, because like a man imprisoned and shackled by regulations, Caiaphus lashed out at Jesus who he perceived to be a threat to the system and stability he found on adhering to all these laws. He challenged Jesus with, "Did you claim that you would destroy God's temple and build it up in three days?" Jesus did not answer, and Caiaphus bellowed, "Have you no answer to make?" And again Jesus chose to remain silent because the temple to which he was referring was the temple of his body which was to be raised after three days.

Jesus was hardly being passive aggressive here, but rather knew and experienced an inner freedom that no tyrant could chain and shackle by threat – that inner freedom which came from obedience to God's will. He did not answer because he knew Caiaphus would not understand. Jesus knew that he was a part of God's larger plan of salvation – a plan which Caiaphus would never accept because God's plan had made provision for the unclean and all those in need of healing. Thus, Jesus was free – he was free on the inside.

By his example we are to learn that we too receive freedom as a gift. We don't create it; we can't manufacture it; we can't purchase it. Freedom is given from God. And the price we pay for freedom, as Paul states it, is that WE are to see ourselves as servants – slaves to one another – instruments in the hands of a loving God.

Once we recognize we cannot manufacture freedom, but only receive it as a gift from God, freedom exacts another price from us. We are to surrender our personal freedom in order to find the freedom of God's larger purpose. But again ... surrender freedom to be free? What a paradox!

We are constantly challenged to give up our own selfish inclinations for the good of the whole. Lord Acton, in the 19th century wrote of this concept when he said, "Freedom is not in the power of doing what we like . . . but the right of being able to do what we OUGHT." Or paraphrasing member of the Men's bible study

who said on several occasions: The question is not “...is this the easy thing to do, but it is the RIGHT thing to do?”

The Apostle Paul expresses that same thought in different language: “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. . . .” Paul is addressing what we all know is a part of our inherent human nature; that part of us that is naturally selfish, self-protective and egotistical. So Paul warns us not to let these natural human inclinations lead us to do only what WE WANT: freedom is not license for pure selfishness.

That warning is one with which the convention of 1787 struggled too. Some wanted to surrender none of their personal freedom to a central government. They wanted to be left alone – free to do exactly as they please; or at least free to maintain stronger colonial/state governments with little or no central unifying authority. They did not believe that freedom could be preserved if the colonies voluntarily surrendered power for the greater good of the whole nation.

George Washington held the opposite view. He wrote: “It is obviously impractical in the federal government of these states, to secure all rights of individual sovereignty to each, and yet provide for the interest and safety of all.” “Individuals entering into society must give up a share of liberty to preserve the rest.” Washington’s view, like that of Madison and Franklin prevailed at the convention, but not without strong objection and opposition. . . .

It is difficult to re-shape our instincts, to reform our natural inclinations from getting what WE want. Yet, surrendering personal freedom and ambition for the sake of the greater good is one of the prices we pay for freedom - in personal life, politics, and yes, even the church. In short, contrary to the disposition of our culture, “It is not all about ME, MY rights, and MY freedom.”

Freedom costs, and it often costs us dearly and personally. That is precisely the point Paul was making when he wrote, “be servants of one another – or as the Greek is literally translated – “be slaves of one another.” Freedom’s price is investing ourselves in others by love. Love is not soft – it is often quite demanding. And Paul’s words seem to imply that love demands that we serve others, even at the risk of being taken advantage of. As Stephen Neill put it: we are not to “be one master with a lot of slaves, but each to be one poor slave with a lot of masters.”

A highly-educated, upper-middle class congregation in the mid-west decided to do something about the homeless people who lived on the streets right around the church. After a great deal of debate, and not without some measure of opposition and fear, the church began opening its doors on Wednesday evenings.

The homeless were in need of a hot meal and a secure place to sleep; so the church used its high-tech commercial kitchen for preparing a meal, and then the fellowship hall was transformed into a shelter, lined with cots for sleeping. Automobile executives found themselves peeling potatoes; university professors stirred and served soup; parishioners who were used to paying to have services done for them, now rolled up their sleeves and became servants to the less fortunate.

After several months of providing food and shelter for the homeless, the pastor wrote in the church newsletter: “We are doing it! And sometimes we are uncomfortable doing it. But then we are learning together that Christian love doesn’t always walk around in gently starched pinafores.”

That congregation is experiencing freedom and freedom’s price. The love they put into practice doesn’t always make them feel comfortable; but then, this isn’t all about them. They are rubbing elbows with the un-kept and the un-clean – “the least of these” as Jesus called them; the very ones who Caiaphus avoided with all of his righteous ritualistic cleansing; yet the very ones who Jesus came to heal and save. Through their servitude the members of this congregation are experiencing the freedom of loving others as an expression of Christ’s love for them. Paradoxically, through their service to others they are truly free.

When the Apostle Paul penned these words to the Christians at Galatia, it was likely a hard sell. We know that a number of those early Christians believers faced a life-time of slavery, as they were captured and enslaved part of the spoils of Roman victories. Others were slaves because they owed money, and the courts declared that they were to serve as indentured slaves until their debts were paid through labor – typically seven years or more. Still others comprising the early church were former Jews who knew all too well the story of their ancestors who had been in the bondage of slavery in Egypt. So slavery for these people was a bitter reality and any talk of freedom a breath of welcomed hope.

Nevertheless, Paul reminds them that freedom has its price. Freedom FROM whatever form of bondage we may endure, quickly transforms into freedom FOR - that larger purpose on the other side. Freedom’s intent is never for personal license to do exactly as we please, nor a life disposition that it is “all about me.” Freedom’s intent is so that we can serve instead of being served.

Freedom has a cost. It’s price is the sacrifice of our individual wants and desires for the sake of the large good of us all – “through love to become slaves to one another.” Or as Paul further reminds us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But the price we are to pay is nothing - nothing in comparison to the price that Jesus paid by giving himself on that cross. He counted the cost; then, for us he paid the price. "Christ has set us free." Amen.