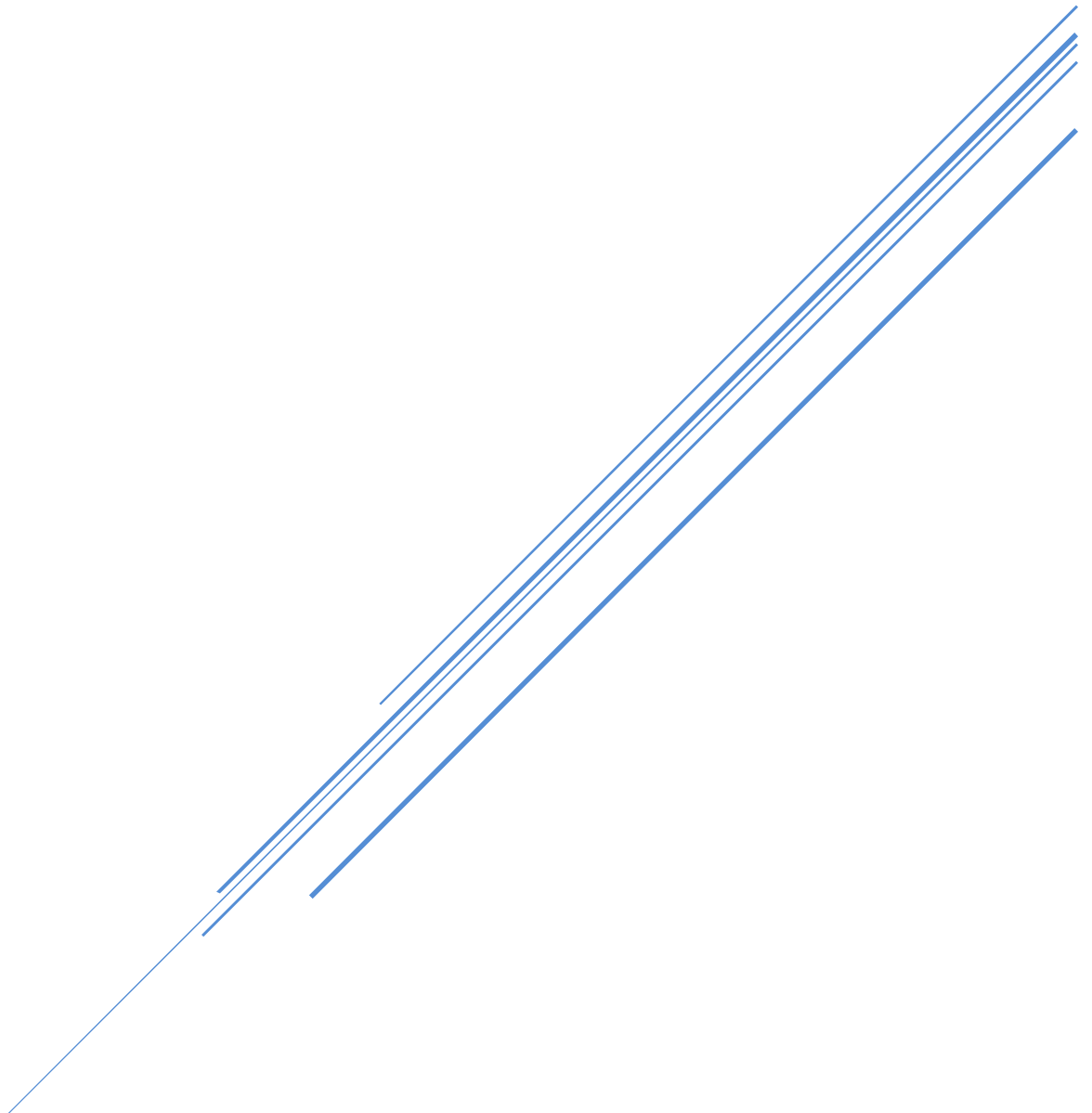


FREEDOM FOR WHOM?

1 Peter 2:9-25



July 6, 2014
Pastor Brad Walston

July 6th Sermon – Independence Day, 1 Peter 2:9-25

Wow. Who knew Independence Day would be this complicated? I've been reading all kinds of articles and blogs with conversations of people who have some very strong feelings about it. It didn't help! How should a new, fresh-from-seminary pastor walk the fine line between faith and patriotism? I read about one congregation who draped the altar and covered the elements of communion with the American flag. I saw video of a large church that set off fireworks in worship! We could all sing a rousing rendition of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*? It seems a bit inappropriate to me to equate the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our love of God and neighbor, with our love of country.

Now don't get me wrong – I'm not some kind of 4th of July scrooge. The kind of pastor who rails about idolatry and how secular humanists are taking over America. Some of my best friends are secular humanists!

NO! I've been blessed to have been able to do some traveling, and I still say I would rather live here than anywhere else in the world. We live in a truly great nation and without our freedoms there's a pretty good chance that we'd have to meet for worship in secret, under penalty of prison, or even death. So how does a pastor plan worship for 4th of July weekend? There's nothing wrong with being thankful for a country where we can worship freely, but to make it the central focus during our Sunday morning worship? It just doesn't seem right.

But this time of year and with some of the supreme court decisions lately, the words 'freedom' and 'liberty' have been bandied around quite a bit, and I think we tend to get complacent about it. My question is, "Freedom for whom, exactly?" You see, we don't always think about what we mean when we say, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," do we?

- Imagine for moment that your spouse of 25 years is in the hospital with a terminal illness. You'd really like to visit them, of course... but the hospital has forbidden you to see them because you aren't technically married.
- Imagine you're at church with your developmentally disabled child – or spouse. Sometimes when they get excited they make noises when he gets excited, and rarely in an appropriate manner. You are asked to leave because your child is 'disruptive.'
- Imagine that you're a Muslim, born and raised in the United States. You and your congregation would like to build a real place to worship in peace,

without having to rent some empty warehouse or school auditorium. The Christians in your town have mall signed a petition and are taking you to court because they don't want a mosque in their back yard.

So when exactly do these 'inalienable rights' kick in? I had a professor who was Lakota Indian and an ordained Lutheran pastor. His lecture on religious freedom was a real eye-opener!

Scripture talks quite a bit about freedom, too. Of course, maybe you've noticed that the Bible usually means something completely different than we do – about most everything! Christian freedom is almost the opposite of what we think of as freedom. Look at this verse from Romans 6:17-18:

“But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

Slaves of righteousness?!?! We're not really free, as Christians, to do whatever we darn well please, but if we entrust our lives to God and to Christ, then we are free to do the work of Jesus Christ.

Is that what we mean by freedom? Now, today's scripture says, we are a 'chosen people.' – God's special possession. When I tried to find a scripture passage about freedom, and I was intrigued by this passage. The author seems to be writing to modern American Christians. He says we should live such good lives among pagans, that they may see our deeds and glorify God. As we've said in the past, preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words. Actions speak louder than words.

Peter says that we are to submit to all human forms of authority, but in the next thought he tells us to live as free people. Live as free people, but live as God's slaves. What? That doesn't sound very free.

Freedom is a funny thing, though. My dad and I were talking about it on the road over Hagerman pass – which is a pretty rough road, I might add. You see, we got up past the reservoir and up to where the pavement ends. There's a sign right there that says it's 14 miles to the pass. We stopped and talked about whether or not we should continue up the road. We figured that 14 miles at 5-10 miles an hour would take a pretty long time. Dad wasn't sure he wanted to spend almost 3 hours on a dirt road – I didn't really want

to either. So we turned around and started talking about how this decision about whether to go on or turn back is rather like life and the choices we get to make.

You see, we can see a little ways up the road, but it looks kind of rough. And maybe the view is spectacular once you get up there. But 3 hours? Is it worth it? And as we talked and drove back down the mountain, I heard dad say, "Well, I'm game if you are." So turned around and went back up the mountain, drove 3 hours over the pass, past Turquoise Lake and had a late lunch in Leadville. It was a grand adventure and I think that in spite of the bumpy road, dad had a good time. We both did.

Freedom. Freedom to go on up the mountain or turn back. But it's a limited freedom isn't it? We still have to stay on some kind of path that has been laid out for us.

Live as free people but live as God's slaves.... As a teenager when you get your drivers' license you have this wonderful sense of freedom, but you find out that this new freedom comes with strings attached. Maybe you have to take your little brother to aftercare, or pick up something from the store. Maybe you have to buy your own gas or pay for your own insurance. That sense of freedom kind of fades away doesn't it? Live as a free teenager, but live as parent's slave, right?

That's the kind of freedom we have. Freedom with strings... On our spiritual path as Christians, we are free to make whatever choices we want, but it is by doing good that we can silence the "ignorant talk of foolish people."

In looking back on our history, the unofficial God of the U.S. has been the God of manifest destiny who guided our pilgrim forefathers across the ocean to settle the land "from sea to shining sea," giving them the right, somehow, to wipe out the folks who already lived there. Just like the children of Israel, we were exceptional among the nations. And this view has been motivational in terms of national expansion, leading to the formation of this great country that we have today. But it has not always been inspirational or ethical. It has led to slavery, genocide, bigotry, and chauvinism. We still suffer under this 'almighty' god, and many political and religious leaders celebrate this god who favors the United States above all other nations, giving us the right do to whatever we please, wherever we please to do it.

This is where the letter from Peter comes in. freedom simply means we have the freedom to make a choice. We are to choose to set an example for the "pagans." Who these pagans might be I can't say, but I have an idea, and Peter gives us a clue when he

tells us not to use our freedom as a cover up for evil. As the bumper sticker says, "Bigotry wrapped in prayer is still bigotry." You can claim 'religious freedom' all you want but discrimination is still discrimination. Jesus was on to them... In Matthew 6:5 he says, "... whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others."

We are free – free to set an example. Free to live our lives the way God would like us to live. For Jesus the primary spiritual principle was love. God's love includes our enemies as well as our friends. It embraces the poor as well as the well-off; the forgotten as well as the privileged.

Here's a question: When we sing God Bless America, are we remembering that Jesus said that it is the poor who are blessed, and that we are the richest nation on the planet?

This passage tells us that Jesus is the example that we should follow. This is the way to live our lives so that the 'pagans' can see us and glorify God. Not by praying loudly in public, but by doing good and enduring any suffering that comes as a result. I think it was Oscar Wilde who said, "No good deed goes unpunished!"

All I'm trying to say is that this weekend, or this month, as we celebrate our independence as a 'free' country, perhaps we should make the choice to do good – and not to use our hard earned freedom as a cover up for evil. Perhaps we should think about who we might be excluding from this so-called 'freedom' that we say we love so deeply.