

What's the Use of Freedom?
Galatians 5:13-5:23

Christ is not mentioned in the Constitution and Democracy is not mentioned in the Bible. So, how do we make our way as we come together to worship this morning on a day which looks forward to the fireworks, celebration, and pageantry of Independence Day?

Now, folks, I like the Fourth of July. Always have. It's a fun holiday, as birthdays should be. On birthdays we don't celebrate that the one we honor is perfect or without flaw, but we celebrate that the one we honor is here, alive, and a blessing.

And America certainly is a blessing to us, and to the world.

Despite our shortcomings, our nation deserves its birthday celebration. We have been, and are, that great shining beacon of hope for all peoples of earth. The Statue of Liberty is a fitting symbol of what we can be, and of what we have been, and are, in so many ways. January 17, 1913. That's when my grandfather, Otto Belger, first came through Ellis Island.

He came for political freedom and economic opportunity. He came because he had a mystical, almost spiritual belief in the notion of America. He was not disappointed. And even today, as we look at the overwhelming flood of illegal immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere, may we understand. Understand why they come. Understand that their dream today is the dream of our grandparents in bygone days. A better life. A more blessed life.

And if we get upset because some speak only Spanish and we can't understand them at the Food Lion, we need to remember that throughout our history there have always been immigrants who kept their own language for the longest time. My other grandfather, in fact, preached at a Swedish-speaking congregation in Orange, Massachusetts. And lest we worry about all these immigrants flooding to our shores from Asia and Africa and Haiti and Cuba and Guatemala, and Mexico, let us not forget that we are nothing but a nation of immigrants.

Whatever our political views about immigration, let us remember that as Christian people we must regard immigrants as nothing less than brothers and sisters in Christ. Laws will determine how our society deals with immigrants, but Christ directs how Christians deal with them.

So, let's be of good cheer and enjoy the picnics and fireworks and wave the flag. Our nation is indeed worthy of such celebration. But where does our Christian faith fit in for us Americans, who know that Christ is not mentioned in the Constitution and Democracy is not mentioned in the Bible?

In America, we can celebrate that we live out our lives, our Christian lives, in the context of freedom. However, we are answerable to God for how we use our freedom, which we consider the most precious gift God has bestowed upon our nation.

And folks, on this time in which we celebrate the gift of freedom our nation has given us, we must take care not to squander this gift by misusing it. On the one side, by using freedom only for selfish and immoral ends, and on the other by turning faith into a matter of coercion, rather than choice. What good is freedom? Not much, if it is used improperly. But wondrous, if used as it is intended, in the service of Christ.

As Paul writes to the Galatians, he knows nothing of political freedom. That a people could be free to speak out against the government or formulate laws would

have been a fantastic notion to him. But Paul does know another kind of freedom, which he finds granted in Jesus Christ. And that is the freedom from the tyranny of old laws and traditions. He found such freedom liberating, but also dangerous.

“You were called to be free,” Paul writes, a sentiment with which we agree, even if our thoughts of freedom run more to the political than the spiritual. But then Paul offers a warning: “Do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature.”

And, here folks, is where it is so easy for a free society to go off track. We all have a sinful, grasping, lustful, selfish nature lurking deep inside. And if we’re not careful, we can live a life that seeks nothing more than to gratify ourselves. Paul lists some of the more obvious sins: *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.*

From the prevalence of pornography on the internet to a television and movie culture that exalts sexuality without reference to commitment, to a social culture that makes our kids grow up way too fast, we have to be wary of the ways in which

we use our freedom.

But the answer is not restricting freedom: it is for us, the Christian community to covenant to use our freedom only responsibly and only for the sake of Christ.

But if I am troubled by the more self-indulgent and valueless excesses of our secular culture, and I am indeed, I am also troubled by those who would replace our notions of freedom with a mandate that would make the Christian faith official government policy.

Many folks who insist that we be a Christian nation are intolerant not just of other faiths, but of other expressions of the Christian faith that do not agree with their own.

In fact, it is ironic when people invoke the name of Thomas Jefferson in support of our nation's being a Christian nation. Because almost no one, Baptist or Catholic or Methodist or Mennonite, would subscribe to Jefferson's notions of faith. He was what is called a Deist. He didn't believe God was active in people's lives, but thought God had just sort of created us, then sat back and watched

impassively. Jefferson rejected every notion of the miraculous. Washington's faith was similar and Ben Franklin's even more radical than that.

If the founding fathers had imposed a faith on this nation, it might well have looked like that. And we wouldn't want that. In America, we are free to be Methodists and Buddhists are free to be Buddhists and Jewish people Jewish, and atheists atheists. Let's be very careful about legislating any changes to this situation.

For no law can make us a Christian nation. Only the spirit of Christ can do that.

And, speaking of the interaction of faith and politics, we Christians need to take care that we are not seduced into defining Political action as Christian action. Now, there is room for good, God-fearing, Christ-loving people to be involved in politics.

There is a room for the ethics and the dreams and the righteousness that define the Christian faith in City Hall, Raleigh and Washington. In the constant seeking of trying to balance the separation of church and state, we have no need to accept the silencing of our ideals and the de facto acceptance of secularism as the official

faith of our nation.

But that being said, Christians must be about stuff more important than politics. I was appalled to hear one prominent pastor say, in a religious gathering, that the Christian focus must now be to defeat Hillary Clinton in 2008. Go after Hillary politically because she's a liberal? Because she's a Democrat? Fair game. But folks, not as a God-given mandate.

And if you think this is in any way an endorsement of Hillary, let me assure you, nothing, and I mean nothing, could be further from the truth. It's just that last I checked, character- assassination is nowhere listed among Christian virtues. Yet many Christians are using precisely this tactic.

And what cost? That in using our political freedom, Christ gets lost in the shuffle. You see, Christians can misuse freedom as well, if we use our freedom to act in less than a Christ-like manner. Sure, we have political freedom to make attacks against opponents, and in the political arena, that's fair game. But when we act in such a way as people of Christ, it is not our opponents, but Christ himself we demean.

If the cost of being a Christian nation would be the promoting of a Christian faith that is rigid and uncompassionate, that seeks to judge rather than invite, that seeks to condemn rather than forgive, that insists on its own way rather than seeking to live in peace and harmony with those of different views, then I'm not sure our nation would be any better off.

But if, on the other hand, we choose, or are led, to use our freedom as Americans for living as Christ has taught us to live, as a caring community, generous in giving and in spirit, then we again honor those who dared to dream of what freedom could accomplish, and we honor those who died for the sake of this ideal.

It could be that what we accomplished in Vacation Bible School last week, with over a hundred kids learning the story of faith, will do more to transform our society than any law that could ever be passed.

May we use this gift of freedom to, in Paul's words, serve one another in love.

May we use this incredible gift of freedom to make Christ a living reality in our home, our church, our city, our nation. And that won't be accomplished by

passing a law or amendment, but rather through our witness, through our living out in our daily lives, the truth of Jesus Christ. And Paul tells us what such a life looks like:

GAL 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Well, Happy Birthday, America. You are a great nation, which I love very much. I appreciate that I live in a nation where I can speak freely, and believe.

But in our spiritual conflict against a nation that seems at time so secular, may we be careful to use not the tactics and ethics of politics, but rather those of Christ. *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control.* As we use our freedom to live in these truths, then our faith becomes contagious, and as hearts are changed Christ-ward, then our nation begins to be transformed, finally, into the nation we, and even God, hope it can be.