"Life of Freedom, Part 1" Psalm 77; Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25 Salem United Methodist Church June 26, 2016 Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

As we approach the 240<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our nation's Declaration of Independence from Great Britain, we remember our freedoms established under our Constitution. But long before this very important document was written, the Apostle Paul developed the theology of freedom in Christ. In this two part sermon series, we will explore what it means to be free in Christ.

As Americans, we are proud of our freedoms. We are citizens of a nation in which we are free to worship any god in any way we please. We are free to speak and write what is on our minds and what is in our hearts. We are free to assemble peaceably. We are free to keep and bear arms. These freedoms were not written into the Constitution in 1787. There was concern that our Constitution was too focused on a central government and did not protect the rights of the individual. The memories of the British tyranny that violated individual rights were still fresh in the minds of this budding nation. So after two years of "cooperative statesmanship and the art of compromise" the First Congress developed and proposed for ratification by the thirteen states the Bill of Rights which insures our individual freedoms. For over two hundred years we have fought to protect our freedoms. Many have lost their lives to protect our freedoms. We have argued about how to uphold our freedoms. And we have tested the interpretations of these freedoms through our judicial system. Other countries have modeled their constitutions with its individual freedoms after ours. We are proud of our freedoms that are upheld by the Constitution of the United States.

But as Christians could we still be free if we didn't live in this country with these freedoms? The answer is yes. As Christians, our freedom in Christ has very little to do with the freedoms established under the Bill of Rights. Even if we didn't have the freedom to assemble, to worship, and to speak our minds and hearts, we could still be free in Christ. Christians have been and are free in Christ no matter what political government is the ruling power. The early church survived, and in fact even grew, under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. The Emperor required that every citizen proclaim publicly that "Caesar is Lord!" because the Caesars thought themselves to be gods. As those who had committed their lives to Christ stood in the lines on the public square to pay homage to the Caesar, they had a choice. They could deny their faith in Christ and shout "Caesar is Lord," in which they could continue to live in peace, or they could publicly shout, "Jesus is Lord," and face arrest, persecution, torture, and death. Many chose the latter. They endured beatings, whippings, maulings, hot irons, mutilations, and much more while singing praises to Jesus and giving thanks to God for their freedom in Christ.

So what is this freedom in Christ that the early Christians chose as they faced torture and death? Paul describes it in his letter to the Galatians. Before we delve into this question, we need to know why Paul was writing about freedom to these new churches in Galatia which is called Turkey today. Paul began these churches probably ten to fifteen years after Jesus' death and resurrection. As a Jew, Paul was preaching that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. Both Galatian Jews and non-Jews came to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. However the conversion of non-Jews raised a question. Did they have to become Jews and abide by all the Jewish laws in order to claim Jesus as the Messiah? Paul presented his case to the Jerusalem Council which consisted of the original disciples. They agreed that new converts did not have to adhere to the Jewish laws.

With this agreement in hand, Paul continued with his mission to start new faith communities. As he was doing so, Paul receives word that someone came to the churches in Galatia and told them that everyone had to follow the Jewish law. So this letter to the Galatians is an angry letter defending the stance that those who believe in Jesus do not have to follow the Torah or the Law of Moses. He begins the summary of this letter with this statement, "Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery [to the Law of Moses] again." So what is the Law of Moses and why not follow it? The Law can be found in the first five books of the Old Testament. During this time the Jews believed that the more closely one followed the Law, the more one was made right with God. One's relationship with God was built on how faithful one was in keeping the Law. Paul states that Christ has set them free from the burdens of the Law. They no longer have to walk around checking off a list of things that they have to do. Jesus has set them free from this. They have freedom to live and not be conscious of everything they do. They no longer have to be slaves to the Law. However, Paul does not mean that we have the freedom to do whatever we want. By no means! This is not what freedom in Christ means. Paul writes that the purpose of the grace of God revealed to us in Jesus is to liberate us, deliver us from evil of this world.

We pray these words every Sunday in The Lord's Prayer, "Deliver us from evil." And yet evil still exists. Paul warned the Galatians to guard their new found freedom in Christ, or they could find themselves succumbing to evil. Thomas Jefferson understood the value of guarding our national freedoms. He wrote, "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." Our nation still stands vigilant to protect freedoms of individual citizens and the liberty of our nation.

But what does "eternal vigilance" mean for Christians? We need to be vigilant for what we allow to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. We need to be vigilant for what we allow to separate us from the source of our freedom in Christ, for what we allow to separate us from God's grace. God's love for us, the source of our freedom, or God's grace is always there for us, but when do we step away, wander away, or turn our backs on God and focus on our own needs and wants. When do we forget about God and others and think only of ourselves? When do we choose to not follow Jesus?

We have been liberated for one thing, and that one thing is to love, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul did not invent this, but pulls back into the Law of Moses, Leviticus 19:18. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." A rabbi who was a contemporary of Paul, commented on this verse, "That is the whole law. Everything else is commentary; go and learn it." When Jesus was asked, what was the most important law, he summarized to love God and to love one's neighbor. So Paul instructs that those who have been freed by Christ can turn what was given in this law into their daily thoughts, attitudes, and practice. They no longer live by the law, but the freedom in Christ allows them to embody or become or live the law of love. Here lies our real freedom. We have the freedom to choose to love or not. We will look at how we can live this life of freedom next week.

To close I would like to offer up this prayer. Lord, you have given us freedom. We are free to hate, help us choose love. We are free to fear, give us faith. We are free to reject others, open our arms to them as you open your arms to us. We are free to be bitter, fill us to overflowing with your grace. We are free to doubt, continue to sow seeds of your love and faith so they can bear fruit in us. Amen.