



MINISTER  
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13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 1, 2007

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*Gal 5: 1, 13-26*

### Called to Freedom

Intro: Our NT lesson is from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul established the church on his first missionary tour. Now, other teachers have followed after him, telling the Galatians that those who would wish to become Christian would first have to become like Jews. They must follow all the Mosaic laws, including circumcision, and then they could be counted as Christians. Paul says this is not true and he laments how the congregation has believed these false teachers. He writes to speak of the freedom they now have because of Christ. Let us listen for God's liberating word as it is found in Paul's words.

Americans love to celebrate Independence Day. Every fourth of July we as a nation gather to celebrate freedom. There are lots of ways we mark the occasion each year; bicycles are decorated and ridden in local parades, there are big and small fireworks displays, flags are everywhere. Thomas Jefferson's bold assertion that each individual has an "inalienable right" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" still sounds sweet to our freedom-loving ears. Despite the imperfections of our political system, we don't want anyone else's. We do enjoy tremendous economic freedom, political

freedom, religious freedom, personal freedom and communal freedom. These are freedoms that have been fought for time and again.

One of the most meaningful and unforgettable depictions on the high cost and responsibility of freedom was a movie by Steven Spielberg that came out a number of years ago. We know right away what the movie is about; the title tells us that: it was called "Saving Private Ryan." So when the movie opens with an old man walking through a graveyard, everyone guesses that this is Private Ryan, the one who was saved,

and the story of his salvation is told throughout the three-hour epic. It begins with the landing on Omaha Beach—D-Day—and it is one of the most harrowing segments in the history of film. We get a glimpse of what it must have actually been like, and that glimpse is so overpowering that we begin to think of those people we knew who were in the war and consider them again. They saw this? They lived through this?

As the story unfolds, a squad of eight men is gathered and assigned to a curious mission: to save Private James Ryan, to find him and send him back home. Why him? All three of his brothers were killed in the days after D-Day and the army determines that they will not deprive a mother of all four of her sons. He is to be sent home. One by one the men in this unit are killed in action, in the act of finding and saving Private Ryan. Right near the end, just as Ryan is being freed, the dying captain in charge of bringing him home calls Ryan over. Not one of the eight men sent to save him would be going home, yet Ryan was now free. The dying captain says "Deserve this..." Ryan can't make out what he's saying and comes closer. "Deserve this."

We go forward in time to when the movie started—we return to the old man. James Ryan kneels at the tombstone of the soldier who died saving him. He remembers what's been done on his

behalf. He remembers a soldier's dying words. "Tell me I'm a good man", he says to his wife, through his tears, "tell me I've lived a good life." As Christians, we too have been given freedom at a great price. Have we deserved it? Have we used our freedom responsibly?

The charge given to Private Ryan to "deserve" what was done for him caused him great anxiety. He knew he was lucky and blessed to be alive, yet he was haunted with the question of was he worthy of being singled out and given so much. He wasn't sure, but wanted reassurance that somehow the answer was Yes. As Christians have we deserved the life and freedom given to us? No. We don't earn or deserve grace and freedom. But still it is ours. And we need to consider how we use our life and our freedom.

Paul's idea of freedom is not the same ideal we Americans cherish. Paul's call to the Galatians tells us that our greatest liberation can be found in our commitments; the greatest being loving our neighbor as our self. The freedoms we enjoy so much solely as "freedom from" -- forget that the real test of freedom's value is how we use our "freedom to." There is our freedom to gather together for the benefit of others, our freedom to love and serve each other and our freedom to express our feelings, concerns, hopes and aspirations for our community, neighbors and friends.

These are things that we are not forced to do, but we are free to.

The Fourth of July is a good time to celebrate the paradox at the center of the Christian faith: We are most free when we are most bonded. Through Jesus Christ's supreme example of freedom in service, we all become the most free when we bind ourselves to Christ and to each other. We must take care not to confuse this freely offered liberty for license. The long list of what Paul calls in Galatians "fleshly works" is what results when we let our freedom to ... become freedom from. Each of the works of the flesh, or the grocery list of sins that he mentions, can be seen as an abuse or an extreme of what is meant to be a good freedom.

Freedom to love becomes ... fornication.  
Freedom to worship becomes ... idolatry.  
Freedom to serve becomes ... factions.  
Freedom to inquire becomes ... enmity.  
Freedom to discuss becomes ... quarrels.  
Freedom to disagree becomes ... dissension.  
Freedom to thrive becomes ... envy.

Paul calls them and us through love, loving our neighbor as self to be slaves to one another. In order to preserve freedom we must exercise love. The freedom to which the Galatians were called, and to which Christ had liberated them is the same which Christ himself had practiced.

We are free and yet we are slaves to one another. That is another of the life-giving tensions we find in scripture and in our lives of faith. It sounds weird and we ask how could it be true. Free and yet slaves. The ideas pull us both ways and provide a stretch and there is life in the challenge. Don't we feel flashes of faith when we do freely choose to serve others. Doing things for others that we didn't have to do, but we did it anyway?

So often in America we hear it's a free country I can do what I want. So often the quest for individual rights overshadows social responsibilities. So often we do what we can, even with legal blessing, but it is not what we should. We have individual freedoms to be used for the common good. The challenge for Christians is to hear God's call to us to embrace the freedom that comes from the bondage of love.

All of us are invited to the table. It is not by works that we have done that we deserve a place, it is not by things we have done that we are held back from taking a place. We have only the invitation to receive the freely offered gift of welcome of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.