At the end of the movie *Braveheart*, Scottish patriot William Wallis stands before the executioner’s block. He has devoted his life to the cause of liberating his homeland from the oppressive rule of the English. Now, in his enemy’s hands, he is given one last chance to be given a painless execution, rather than endure additional torture. He refuses, and with his dying breath screams “FREEDOM!”

Self rule and governance by just and equally applied laws. National independence. The political and social and economic ability to lead ones life the way one chooses. These are the ideas we usually associate with the word FREEDOM – especially as we enter our nation’s annual celebration of its declaration of independence. Freedom. A cherished ideal and national vision.


The churches in Galatia were unique among those founded by Paul. Paul’s message of freedom in Christ found eager and willing ears among these urbanized descendents of settlers from Gaul. The churches were remarkable by ancient or modern standards. Composed of quite diverse peoples – men and women, Jews and Greeks, slaves, slaveowners, and freedmen - the church practiced a Christianity that bridged those social barriers which usually divide and drive people apart. Within the church they had eliminated all forms of social discrimination and forged one body of Christ in who there was neither east nor west, south nor north, but one whole and holy church under the lordship of Christ. Biblical scholar Hans Dieter Betz observes “To them Christian faith meant that the age-old dream of human freedom had become a reality. For them ‘freedom’ was not merely a theological notion, but they regarded themselves as free from ‘this evil world’ with its repressive social, religious, and cultural laws and conventions.” (29)

In America our political freedom is structured and guaranteed by the civil law. The Galatian Christians’ freedom was rooted in the spirit of Christ. Through their shared faith in Jesus Christ, the Galatians found a deeper fellowship one with another, that transcended the legal and social barriers which separated them. They were united not by a common law or legal code, but by their love for Christ. For the Galatians, Paul’s declaration “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28) did not just mean something. It mean EVERYTHING.

The Galatian Church was really quite remarkable. But it was also very vulnerable. It is not easy to simply “live by the spirit”, doing what is good and right without any hard and fast rules to guide you. So it was no surprise that when Paul left Galatia, and some other apostles came to town demanding the religious community be shaped by the letter of the law and not simply the spirit of the law – the churches fell away from their high ideals and holy life. They apparently ran into problems which they could not handle under the terms of Paul’s preaching. They began to order their community life by rules and laws, instead of the dynamic but non-specific leadership of the spirit. Like most modern Presbyterians, the Galatians found doing things “decently and in order” both comfortable and convenient.
This is not to say that Paul – or the Galatians – or for that matter Christian faith today – is opposed to the law. Rather, Paul saw the religious law of Judaism as of limited value for the Christian. Paul was adamantly opposed to those who taught if you live a good life, as measured by religious rules, then you are assured of salvation. Paul believed all human beings are so terribly broken that NO one could possibly live by the rules of religion. It is only through God’s grace that anyone can come to faith. Faith and a life with God are God’s two wonderful gifts to us. Gifts we do not deserve, nor will we ever earn.

So, according to Paul, what then is FREEDOM for the Christian? Christian freedom, unlike the political freedom we celebrate this week, is not freedom established by and under law. Christian freedom, in a sense, is freedom FROM the law so that we can do MORE THAN the law requires. Christian faith does not dismiss the commandments of the Hebrew Bible. But the commandments are not the basis of faith. The commandments are valuable GUIDES for living the life of faith – but simply living by the Ten Commandments – or any collection of commandments and rules – does not constitute faith. For the Christian, faith is faith in Jesus Christ alone. And faith is not about following certain commandments, but about living in TOTAL COMMITMENT to the life and message of Jesus. Faith is not about what we HAVE to do, but what we WANT to do because of what God has already done for us.

The only rule for the Christian is the rule of LOVE: as God in Christ has loved us, so also we are called to love one another. Paul, in one of the few instances in which he quotes the teachings of Jesus, agrees with him completely: The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Christian is called to the highest expression of the moral life: a life of love. Love for God, love for neighbor, love for self. Unconditional love for others, even as God loves us. The Christian should never ask, “what does the law require of me? Or what does God require of me?” The only question important to the Christian is WHAT DOES THE LAW OF LOVE LEAD ME TO DO? What does the spirit of God I know in Jesus Christ call me to do?

Christian freedom is not freedom FROM as much as it is freedom FOR living by the spirit. And if we live by the Spirit, Paul says, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Christian freedom is the voluntary and intentional setting aside of self-serving motives and behaviors (what Paul calls “works of the flesh”) in order to pursue the true and lasting freedom that comes from a life with Christ. Being set free from the bands of death and a broken life, the Christian binds himself to Christ and pursues the “fruits of the spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. No law can force people to live by such virtues. But where love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control abound, NO LAW IS NECESSARY (cf Betz 33)

Which leads to the other word of the sermon title: RESPONSIBILITY. In gratitude to God for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, we take on obligations for others which no law can require of us. We accept responsibility for caring for one another so that the love of Christ might abound in the community of the church. We accept responsibility for caring for those whom even the civil law does not protect, so that all might share in the love of God. Out of our love for Christ we seek to develop a deeper RESPONSE – ABILITY, so that the joys of the Christian life might extend throughout the world, until these earthly kingdoms are united within God’s kingdom.

Friends: you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For freedom Christ has set us free. AMEN.
Galatians 5:1, 13-25

5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

13 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. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.