

“The responsibility that freedom brings”

July 1, 2007

Text: Galatians 5:1-25

I.

With the 231st anniversary of our great nation only a few days away, it is appropriate that we take pause and reflect on the meaning that July 4th holds for us as people of faith.

The pinnacle event related to this date is of course the famous **Declaration of Independence**, penned for the most part by Thomas Jefferson. Words from this *declaration* continue to ring out to us across the centuries and decades ...

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

- When I hear these words ... and when I think about the meaning of our independence, what I think of is ***freedom***.
- When we think about the United States of America, what it means to be an American ... when we reflect on our way of life, what we seek to stand for in the wider, international world, what we think of is ***freedom***.
- As Americans, we're passionate—big time—about our freedom.

Our Bill of Rights, the addendum to our Constitution, has to do with our freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and on and on.

In our legend and lore, words of freedom sound out: ***Let freedom ring***. The great American prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr., used these words in his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, in front of the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963.

As he closed his dynamic and eloquent speech that day, *Let freedom ring*, he said ...

- *from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire ...from the mighty mountains of New York, **let freedom ring** ...*
- *from Stone Mountain of Georgia ... from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee, **let freedom ring** ...*

II.

We are a nation imbued with a proud and profound sense of FREEDOM. However, having said this, and in no way wanting to diminish the sanctity of freedom in the human

situation, FREEDOM has a context. Along with freedom comes *responsibility*.

Curiously, in our American culture, we never hear much about *responsibility*.

1. Responsibility has to do with moral and ethical consequences.
2. It has to do with accountability ... with being a mature, adult person ... with making decisions that look beyond the moment, that see the *big picture*.
3. It's not *self-focused*, but rather *relationship* focused, *family* focused, *community* focused, *planet earth* focused.

The point about *freedom* and *responsibility* is that they go together; we can't just **do what we want** or **say whatever we want** for our own amusement, we have to consider the wider impact of our choices.

Some weeks back, radio talk-show host, Don Imus was reminded of this the hard way when he carelessly and flippantly referred to the **Rutgers University** women's basketball team in crude and denigrating language.

Imus lost his job over his remarks ... which led to a subsequent discussion about the content of *hip-hop* lyrics and how they reinforce violent and abusive behavior in some areas of community life ... and about the *responsibility* all forms of media have in our wider culture.

The responsibility that freedom brings. What we do and say and sing, as entertainment or as opinion, has consequences.

Pope John Paul II once said, ***Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.*** (that's a good quote: *having the right to do what we ought*)

When one person's *pursuit of happiness* (in the exercise of their freedom) infringes on another person's basic human rights, it becomes a question of ***responsible freedom*** ...

III.

In his epistles, the Apostle Paul talks about **freedom**, about being *free in CHRIST*. However, some of the churches in ***Galatia*** were misunderstanding this freedom.

There was a faction of Christians who wanted to believe that *freedom in CHRIST* meant they could do whatever they wanted ... whatever was pleasing to them ... whatever fed their own biases and prejudices, as if there were no moral or ethical guidelines.

They'd been blinded to the fact that freedom has a context and that—always, as Christians—our exercise of freedom has to do with love and realizing God's purposes, and lifting up the common good.

Listen to Paul in Galatians 5:

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 servants of one another.

In other words, *you can't just do your own thing with no regard for anyone else*. As individuals, as communities, as nations, we're social creatures ... all in this life together.

We've all known situations where self-indulgence goes overboard.

- Noisy neighbors ... where late-night parties get out of hand ...
- People chatting audibly in movie theatres during the movie ... or ...
- Neighbors whose dogs bark and groan because they're cooped up all day, never receiving the exercise that dogs need.

There are responsibilities with our freedoms.

IV.

As family members, we have responsibility to the larger family ... to uphold the dignity and the memory of our family name. Which is to say, how we live and die makes a difference. It sends a message and it means something.

It's the same with teams, in sports or at work. There's an ethical *code* that binds us together ... and, over time, it makes us greater than the sum of our parts.

The responsibility that freedom brings. We're not islands unto ourselves; we're social creatures.

Paul goes on to say, *For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.***

In other words, all the laws, the rules and guidelines for living ... all the obedience to which we are called to be good and righteous people ... ultimately come down to LOVE.

Love *is* the heart and soul of responsibility—to the point where, to act *responsibly*, is to DO the loving thing.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

V.

Paul was particularly upset with some of the Galatian Christians because they were becoming promiscuous and self-indulgent in their ways. Mistakenly, they had somehow convinced themselves that now that Christ had come and that, as believers, they were *saved*, that nothing else mattered.

They were FREE, they reasoned ... free to do what they wanted.

To which Paul would have said, *You're free, to be sure ... free to **live by the Spirit**. Therefore, do what the Spirit leads you to do.*

And then he goes on to explain what that is. *The fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.***

In other words: live by these values.

VI.

On Wednesday, America turns **231**. Wow! Lots to celebrate! But there's more; because when you're number one in the world (the lone superpower on the planet), there are major *responsibilities* that go with it.

Seven and a half years into the new century, the question for us is, *How will America lead in the 21st century?* By almost any standard, we have not distinguished ourselves well thus far. In fact, I don't know if American popularity has ever been so low, with the on-going drum beat of the Iraq War and the perception of American arrogance around the world.

As the 21st century unfolds, we must tap into the greatness of our past ... while finding ways of embracing the future with an optimism and hope that all the nations of the earth can share.

There is greatness in the American spirit. With our democratic ideals, our staunch freedoms, and blessings of abundance and prosperity, we are the envy of the world. But we must measure up to the greatness in our spirit.

Listen to these words that John F. Kennedy had planned to tell the audience at the Dallas Trade Mart on that fateful day back in November of 1963 (this is in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union):

*The most effective way to demonstrate America's strength is not to threaten our enemies. It is to live up to our country's democratic ideals and **practice what we preach about equal rights and social justice.***

There's greatness in our American spirit, friends ... and all the more when we measure up to **the responsibility that our freedom brings**.

Wow! Great words ... words that take the high road.

Live by the Spirit, says Galatians; and *love your neighbor as yourself*. In other words, **see the big picture** and act **big**. In other words, *be* Christian. When we act as Christians ought to act, it can change the world.

O what a day!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com