

## **Pastor's Wednesday Message - July 1, 2020**

### **The Fourth, Faith and Freedom**

For almost a month now, Nightfall has brought the sounds of urban warfare to the 60203 zip code. I expect that as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July comes closer these next couple of days, the explosions will intensify and increase in frequency. For many in my neighborhood, for reasons that elude me, Liberty seems to be spelled B-O-O-M!

It is, apparently, all about the celebration of freedom. We Americans do love our freedom, often with an exuberance that finds explosive expression! The pursuit of freedom is a basic tenet of the orthodox expression of American civil religion; along with unfettered, laissez faire style capitalism. (Although we do suspect that French term for the "invisible hand". You know how those French people are!)

We love our freedom. We are devoted to the pursuit of freedom. It's woven deeply into the fabric of our culture and it is sequenced as a durable mutation on our nation's genome. Americans talk about Freedom and pursue freedom with an almost religious fanaticism that leaves many wanting to blow things up for a couple of months every summer.

Which leads to the question of just what freedom means, how it is to be used, and how it is to be celebrated. I have been thinking about this a great deal of late as I hear folks complain about the abridging of their freedoms and the quashing of their rights during this pandemic. What is this freedom that we love so much? How do Christians think about freedom?

I have heard people argue, with a straight face (and I could see that their faces were straight because they were not wearing masks) that it was their right not to wear masks in public. "Last time I checked, this was a free country", said one of the unmasked many at a protest in my native Michigan. He was there with hundreds of others protesting against Michigan's Governor Whitmer who had issued a stay at home order that was quite unpopular with the no - mask crowd. "The government has no right to tell us what we can't do", said another in the crowd, "This is supposed to be a free country". I received a letter in advance of Pentecost Sunday from some folks who, apparently, did not want me to know exactly who they were, since there was no return address on the envelope. The writer was encouraging me in the strongest terms to make sure that I opened up

my church on Pentecost to "celebrate the Spirit" and reminding me that we had the right to open in spite of what the Governor said because, opined the writer, "We're supposed to have religious freedom in this country!"

Indeed, this is a “free country.” We are a free people. The question is, what is freedom? It seems even clearer to me in these days of pandemic tension that a great many people think freedom means that they can do whatever the heck they want! For them it is about the unfettered expression of personal will and unassailable individual rights. For these folks, the expression of freedom is freedom from ... Freedom from responsibility to others, from obligations to others, from the demands of others, from having to deal with others. The only word that comes to my pastor-ly mind when I hear folks describe freedom as the unfettered expression of their own personal will without reference to anyone else is **idolatry**. If your freedom is all about you, it is neither holy nor faithful. It is an idolatrous expression of self-will.

Christians are called to freedom, but the expression of Christian freedom is altogether different. It is not just freedom from it is freedom to. It is not so much about the unfettered exercise of my personal rights as it is the unlimited opportunity to express love for God and for God’s people.

Lutherans have been struggling with this idea of freedom from the time of Martin Luther onward. In his tract from 1520 entitled, *On the Freedom of the Christian*. Luther describes the crux of the matter in what sounds like two contradictory propositions.

A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all.

Luther summarizes, “...in I Cor. 9 :19, Paul writes, ‘For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all,’ and in Rom. 13:8, ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another.’ Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although He was Lord of all, was ‘born of woman, born under the law’ [Gal. 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and servant, ‘in the form of God’ and ‘of a servant.’ [Phil. 2:6-7].” As utterly free as Christ was, He also bound Himself under the law to serve His creatures and win their salvation. Christ’s salvific example becomes the form of Christian freedom.”

As with most things Lutheran, freedom is spoken of not so much as an either/ or, but both/and. I think we Americans would, by and large be fine with the first of those propositions. The second one though, is the one that seems to give us trouble: “A Christian is an utterly dutiful person, servant of all and subject to all”. Contrary to the popular cultural understanding, our freedom as Christian people, does not absolve us of responsibility for the other it heightens it. Our freedom does not release us from the consideration of well being of the other, it requires it. It all has to do with following the example of Jesus <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—  
Philippians 2:6-8

This is why Paul counsels in Philippians 2. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

For Christians, the question in these frustrating days of pandemic-related strictures and governmental impositions that impinge upon our freedoms is not “what do you have the right to do,” but “what does Christian love call you to do?” Is your freedom a freedom from, or a freedom to? Will your freedom find expression in care for others, or concern for yourself?

Wearing a facemask in public can be an expression of the Christian freedom to choose to love and care for others. Not wearing a mask in public can also be an expression of freedom...the freedom to do what you darn well please. The former is faithful. The latter is not. Opening the church in spite of the risk of infecting worshippers with a lethal virus can be an expression of our constitutionally guaranteed rights and living into our freedom. Keeping the church closed can also be an expression of our freedom... our freedom to love and care for our brothers and sisters. One is concerned with the freedom from stricture and the expression of rights. The other is focused on the freedom to love and care for the other. One is faithful. The other is idolatrous.

This Saturday, we celebrate our freedom from political overlords, our freedom to live and do as we please. I have to say that I love those freedoms and I celebrate them. But as we celebrate this Independence Day, may we remember not just the founding father’s declaration of independence, but our Lord’s declaration of holy interdependence, “Love one another, as I have loved you so you should love one another”.

As evening falls and the sounds of urban warfare come to your zip code signaling an explosive celebration of freedom, I want to encourage you to give thanks. Give thanks for the freedoms that accrue to you because you are a citizen of this great country, and give thanks to God for the freedoms that come to you because you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Remember as you celebrate freedom and yearn for freedom that:

A Christian is an utterly free (person), lord of all, subject to none.

And,

a Christian is an utterly dutiful (person), servant of all, subject to all.

***-Pastor Brown***