

GRATEFUL FOR THE FOUNDATION OF FREEDOM

Galatians 3:13-14

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“Every life needs two things”, the old saying goes. “Every life needs roots and wings.” We need to be grounded. Our roots remind us of who we are and where we’re from. Our roots provide a solid foundation for our life and our growth. Without roots, plants wither and die quickly. Roots provide the nutrition system, allowing a plant to receive water and nutrients. But human beings also need wings - we need the freedom to explore the world around us, to see new horizons, to find out where it is we want to plant ourselves next.

Relationships need both roots and wings. Relationships need to be grounded in covenants, promises which provide boundaries and a sense of security for two individuals. There’s really nothing better than to be able to honestly say to your significant other, “I feel safe with you.” But relationships also need wings. Each individual needs a life of his or her own, the freedom to grow as a person, and then to freely choose to come home.

And organizations, too, need both the structure of rootedness and the freedom to change and adapt. Our nation is rooted in documents like the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, the Bill of Rights. We’re rooted in the stories of our founders and leaders and citizens who have worked towards helping us realize our potential. One of our foundational principals and values is freedom itself. “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is guaranteed. One of our founding documents itself has the word

“independence” in its title. Our country was founded with equal regard for both responsibility and for freedom.

Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. In the beginning, when God created humanity, God could have made us puppet-like, so that whenever God wanted us to do something, God would just pull a string and we would do it. But instead, God created us with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the living God.

There are more than fifty references to freedom in the New Testament, including the one we read this morning. That passage gives us a clue as to what was going on in the church at Galatia. There were two camps, two groups of people with differing opinions as to which was most important. One group of people put the emphasis on wings. They believed that nothing was more important than freedom, and to them freedom meant license to do whatever you pleased. To them, Paul says, “It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom.” In other words, freedom in Christ is freedom framed by a covenant, by a love of God. It is freedom to act within the context of a relationship with God, a relationship of love.

There was another camp who felt that the most important thing was rules, the kind of roots that restrict and choke. They thought that all believers should adhere strictly to certain religious regulations. Paul was passionately convinced that observing rituals like circumcision wasn’t necessary. To these rule-bound people, he says, “The only thing that counts is faith working through love.” Rules for the sake of rules are meaningless. Rules that work towards love are the only ones worth our attention.

In our personal lives, in our life together as a church, and in our life together as a nation, there is one law that is supreme above all others. The law of love. We are given freedom FOR a specific purpose, and that purpose is love.

The great 20th century thinker Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way, “Basically love means...being responsible, responsible to our family, towards our civilization, and toward the universe of humanity.”

To be free means to be liberated from the prison of our own self-concerns. If you look at ads and watch commercials, you would think that there is nothing more important than thinking about your own happiness as many hours of the day as possible. “What can I eat that would make me happy right now? What can I buy? What kind of car can I drive? It’s all about me!” Freedom in Christ liberates us from selfishness. It is the same freedom Jesus exhibited when he chose to speak up for the downtrodden and forgotten, speaking against authority, even though those free choices eventually led to his death. He made the free choice to empty himself of his power and status and safety and take on the form of a servant.

The United States has a particular calling: to be a servant people, bringing good news to the oppressed, modeling justice, proclaiming liberty to the captives. It is our responsibility - to repair, to raise up, to build up, to offer hope.

One of our country’s earliest judges said this: “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women - it weighs their interests alongside its own...the spirit of liberty is the spirit of the One who 2000 years ago, taught humanity a lesson it has never learned but also never quite forgotten, a lesson about the possibility of a better world, where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.”

Friends, our country was built on the most promising foundation imaginable: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all people are created equal.” But that promise has not proven to be reality for many. And so our nation is in trouble. We are divided in many ways. Politically, our divisions are obvious. We are divided between blue states and red states. We are divided between people who believe that the American promise has led to their own prosperity and those who feel that the American promise has left them behind.

As people who follow Jesus, our responsibility is clear. We have to be a part of the solution. No matter which candidate wins on Tuesday, we have to roll up our sleeves on Wednesday and be about the work of healing this nation. We have to set aside our animosity towards the other party and the other party’s candidate and pray for our new president, sincerely wishing him or her the best.

And if we don’t like the choices we’ve been faced with this year, what are we going to do to try to have better choices in the future? Are we encouraging the best and brightest of our young people to enter public service? Are we talking to them about it? Are we getting involved at the grass roots?

What are we doing, as individuals, and as a church, to find the commonalities that exist between us and work together in that great vast middle which is where most people really find themselves?

There is common ground, and it is found in the great issues of our day. Our responsibility is to use our freedom to bring more love into the world. That means refusing to demonize the other side. That means looking for those places where we can work with one another to bring about a more peaceful and just world. Let me give you some concrete examples.

In the vast middle are most people who would agree on these issues.

In the vast middle are people who want less gun violence, even though we may disagree on the strategies. In the vast middle are people who want better public schools for all children - not just our own, because we know that education is the key to ending poverty, despair and the feeling of disenfranchisement - the feeling that the American dream isn't ever going to be reality for whole populations. In the vast middle are people who want fewer abortions, even though we may disagree on how we arrive there. We can all agree that we want less hunger and homelessness, more compromise and civility.

The first decision is the decision we each are called to make, in our own hearts and minds. The decision that we will accept the outcome of the election and commit ourselves to doing what we can to improve our nation over the course of this next four years. Our church is already part of the solution. Through our youth program, we are helping to form the next generation of Christians and citizens, men and women who understand that the purpose of freedom is not to improve our own lives but to lift up those around us. Through our mission program, we partner with those on the front lines, not just giving hand-outs, but helping to provide hope and lasting solutions to those who are struggling to find their way into America's promised land. We are free, thank God, but we are not free from responsibility. We are free for love. Free for the responsibility that is ours to live as Jesus did, the life of service, freely-chosen, the life that brings more love into the world.

Source for some of the material in this sermon: "The Predicament of Freedom," Joanna Adams