**Sermon for Proper 8-C**

**Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Aiken, South Carolina**

06-29-25

Galatians *5:1, 13–25*

This July 4th will mark the 249th anniversary of our Declaration of Independence. “Freedom” will be the word of the day.

 The freedoms we have, and the dignity of life that we enjoy here because of them, ought to be celebrated, and we ought to give thanks to God for them.

However, as Christians, we have an even better freedom to celebrate; an eternal freedom, for which, we give thanks to God every day.

We embrace and give thanks for the freedom that has been bestowed upon mankind by Jesus Christ, who has freed us from slavery to the law of commandments, and from the eternal punishment that we are due, because of our failure to live up to the holy requirements of God, which our sinful hearts do not desire, at all, to obey.

 The blood of Jesus Christ crucified has washed us clean and has made us holy; innocent before God. Therefore, he has declared mankind righteous.

 We make this righteousness our own when we believe that we have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

As with our civil freedom, our eternal freedom is not without responsibility. Freedom actually carries with it greater responsibility, because, as free people, we are not being kept in line by harsh oppressors, nor by doting guardians.

As free people, we are responsible for our own actions, and we only have ourselves to blame when we squander our freedom, act irresponsibly, and as a result, pay the price.

Jesus Christ has atoned for all of our sins; even those of which we aren’t even aware; even those that we’ve not yet committed.

 But this is not a blank check to live a life of unrepentant decadence, giving free reign to our urges to say and do whatever we desire.

That would actually be a form of submitting ourselves back under the very yoke of bondage that Jesus has removed from us at great price to Himself.

 That would be taking Christ’s life, suffering and death, and throwing it back in His face, rejecting salvation, and joining again the unbelieving world in its death march to hell.

While the world operates according to the flesh, that is, according to the fallen nature, thanks be to God that we who believe are no longer slaves to our flesh.

 The apostle Paul lists the fruits of the sinful heart, with a warning; *19Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

In other words, those who practice such things are not destined for heaven; they consign themselves to hell.

Everything that is against God’s law, no matter how much the world may celebrate, promote, or declare it to be normal, is not normal, nor is it good. It is sinful, and it is destructive.

Look at the list; everything that the apostle Paul names are the very things that make our homes and our communities unhealthy, unstable, and unsafe. These are the things that destroy a civilized society.

Everything that Paul names is destructive to congregations, to peoples’ faith, and has even caused churches to close.

 Everything that Paul names is destructive to the individual; physically, mentally, and spiritually. These are the very things that kill the soul, and drive it from God.

 Therefore, all of us ought to reflect very carefully upon ourselves, be very quick to repent, and very, very slow to point the finger at others. *14For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*

We therefore repent of all of those times that we act according to the flesh, and we cling fervently to Christ’s holy absolution, as if our life depended on it; because it does.

 Because the Spirit of Christ dwells within us, we have a better motivation; God’s love, pointing us to the better way; the godly way.

 Because the Spirit of God dwells within us, we want to amend our lives, and walk in this better way; the way of Christ; the way of love.

You might have heard the phrase “the third use of the law.” We know that God’s law has two purposes; it is a curb that keeps evil in check, and it is a mirror that shows us our sin.

 God’s law as a mirror is actually it’s ultimate purpose, showing us that nothing that we do could ever erase our sin, and make us presentable before God. Only Jesus Christ could do that for us, and he has.

When we believe this gospel, only then do we desire to do those things that God desires. It is the love of Christ that compels us with a willing heart to order our lives according to God’s holy law.

Not out of grudging obligation or fear, but from a heart motivated by the Spirit of God; the Spirit of love. God’s holy law now becomes our guide.

This is the so-called third use of the law, and it only applies to Christians, because, only we have the Spirit of God dwelling in us, conforming our will to God’s will, and moving us to love others as God loves us.

Therefore, Faith in the salvation that we have through Jesus Christ is bound to produce good works; the fruits of the Spirit; and how different these are from the fruits of the flesh.

 *22But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

As you listen to and observe those who practice and promote the works of the flesh, you’ll find that none of them exhibit any of these fruits of the Spirit; for the Spirit of God does not dwell in them.

As we grow and mature in the Christian faith through the Word and the Sacraments, it is, more and more, the Holy Spirit, not our passions and desires, that order our priorities and our conduct. *24And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

What a difference a change of heart makes. For example, where our habit may once have been to point out and complain about anything that we find wrong, we instead begin to consider how we might be able to help make it right.

We try not to cause offense. We desire to be at peace with everyone, and when we’ve caused offense, we seek reconciliation. When we have been offended, we forgive.

Godly love is very patient; it does not demand its own way. We quietly serve each other, giving freely of our resources for the sake of helping and improving the situation wherever we find that there is need.

We’re not trying to work our way into heaven. Jesus Christ has already prepared a place for us in paradise; we’re just waiting to be ushered in at Jesus’ return.

Meanwhile, we are free to serve our neighbor as best we can, which is, of course never good enough, but our lives are hidden in Christ; so, we can relax, and not worry that we didn’t say or do everything perfectly.

We walk, and say, and do, by faith, and we commend the rest to God. *25If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.*

 For freedom Christ has set us free; free to love others as God loves us; free from the fear of violating God’s law, and coming into judgment, because of some unintended misstep. Free to walk by faith, not sight.

Carefully guard this freedom that you have of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, and do not be subjected to the yoke of legalism on the one hand, or instant gratification and self-indulgence on the other.

Live and walk in faith and in the Spirit of God, who will guide you into all truth, through His word. Amen.