**Galatians: Paul’s Letter of Freedom**

**Sunday October 28, 2018**

**“Hold on to Your Freedom” (Galatians 5:1-12)**

**1. Introduction: *The Shawshank Redemption***

One of my favourite movies of all time is *The Shawshank Redemption,* which is based on a short story by one of my favourite authors, Stephen King. This movie, however, might not everyone’s cup of tea. Since it’s a prison movie, the language can be a bit harsh and it’s depiction of prison life is somewhat disturbing. But if you can get past those things, it’s a really good movie. The plot of the movie centres on Andy Dufresne, a man falsely accused of his wife’s murder, who ends up doing hard time in Shawshank prison.

Part way through the movie, one of Andy’s fellow inmates, a older gentleman named Brooks, finds out that he’s served his time and is going to be released. In response, Brooks goes crazy and attacks another inmate because he’s frightened by the prospect of re-entering the world. The other inmates are all puzzled by Brook’s behaviour because they all long to be released from prison. As they sit and talk about what happened, another prisoner named Red offers this explanation, “*These walls are funny. First you hate’em, then you get used to ‘em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them. That’s institutionalized. They send you here for life, and that’s exactly what they take. The part that counts, anyway*.” On the outside, Brooks tries to adjust to his new life of freedom, but he finds it quite difficult. He longs to return to Shawshank, to the safe and predictable pattern of his life in prison.

I wonder if we’re a bit like Brooks when it comes to the life of faith. When faced with the prospect of freedom in Christ, we get a little frightened and long for the security of those prison walls of the past. Yet, Paul boldly declares, “Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you” (Galatians 5:1).

**2. Christ has set us free**

Last Sunday’s reading from Galatians emphasized that *freedom* is a key component of our identity in Christ. Using the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Paul stressed that those who live by faith in Christ are the *children of the free woman* and not of the *slave woman* (Galatians 4:31). The vocabulary of *freedom* (Galatians 2:4; 5:1, 13) and *slavery* (Galatians 4:8, 9, 24, 25; 5:1, 13) can be found throughout Galatians as Paul emphasizes that true freedom is found in Christ but submitting to the Mosaic law will only result in a return to enslavement. Our identity in Christ as accepted, loved and forgiven, and free children of God impacts how we live our life in the world. If we fail to embrace this new reality that Christ brings, we will become susceptible to the chains of our former lives when we did not know God.

The opening words of this morning’s Epistle lesson clearly show the vital link between our identity and action; our being and doing; the indicative and imperative of the Christian life. Our *Christian* *identity* is grounded in the reality that Christ has set us free from the imprisonment of our previous life. Galatians 5:1 reads, “*So Christ has truly set us free*” or as Eugene Peterson translates this verse, “Christ has set us free to live a free life.” This is the central theme of Galatians and it is the message that Paul desperately wants all Christians to grasp. At the same time, he does not want us to take our *freedom in Christ* for granted. Instead, he calls all Christians, to “*Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*” (5:1). Our identity as people who have been freed by Jesus should not lead to inactivity or complacency; rather, we are to be vigilant and aware of the many ways that we could become ensnared again. Christ has set us free so that we can live a free life, unfettered by the chains of the past.

Eugene Peterson writes, “The gift and experience of freedom is a piece of ground from which we can assert initiative. It must not be relinquished. It was won in a hard fight. Christ gave his life in victorious battle for this piece of real estate. It must be preserved. Nothing and not one may be permitted to encroach upon it. Every Christian must preserve the stance of freedom on this ground” (Peterson, *Travelling Light,* p. 135).

Throughout Galatians, Paul argues that Christ has set Christians free from the demands of the law – a message that was particularly relevant to the Gentile Christians in Galatia whom the rival preachers were trying to convince to submit to the Mosaic law. But Paul’s focus on the believer’s freedom in Christ is not limited to Galatians as he writes elsewhere that Christ has freed us from: *the law* (Romans 7:3-4); *sin* (Romans 6:18-22); and *death* (Romans 8:2).

In last Sunday’s sermon I spoke about the many things that enslave us. That list could include such things as: sin, addictions, the law, rules, traditions, guilt, stress, anxiety, poor self-image, the mistakes of the past, the worries of the present and the fears about the future. The message of Galatians is that Jesus frees us from all those things so that we can be free to relate to God and free to live for God in the world. All those things weigh us down and inhibit our ability to move around. Living a life of *faith* in God enables us to entrust our lives to God and to have the confidence to move forward in the life of faith. Yet this isn’t easy to do. Sometimes, we willingly put a *yoke of slavery* on our shoulders or we let others do it for us. When we’re stressed, restless or feeling bad about ourselves, we indulge in our addictions to food, media, alcohol, sex or drugs and accept that yoke of slavery. When we are burdened with guilt or sin, we try to offload it by piling up good deeds, desperately trying to compensate for our failures. In our desperation, we sometimes let others tell us how to be a *good* Christian, gladly adopting their lists of do’s and don’ts in order to fit in and measure up*.* But when we freely relate to God, our *Abba Father,* we don’t need to fill our lives with things to ease our pain, calm our restlessness or satisfy our the hunger of our soul; we don’t need to bear the burden of our guilt; we don’t need to adhere to a cookie-cutter version of Christianity that mass-produces Christian clones. The truth of the matter is that the Father loves us, and he graciously takes the heavy yoke from our shoulders and pours his love and grace into our hearts, enabling us to stand upright and walk around.

Perhaps what enslave us the most are our false pictures of God. In his book, *Intimacy with God,* Thomas Keating discusses how our unhealthy ideas of God can hinder our relationship with God*.* For instance, we might think that God is *distant* from us. Keating writes, “If God is ‘out there,’ especially in some distant heaven, how is one going to climb up to God? If we fall on our faces after a few steps, as is normally the case, we may conclude, ‘I guess this is not for me, God and I do not seem to get on.’ It is impossible to pass through the trials of the spiritual life if we think that God is a million miles away and that we have to climb up to God, or that we have to make ourselves worthy of God” (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* pp. 7-8). Keating goes on to discuss other negative caricatures of God that people have: a *tyrant* who demands absolute obedience; an implacable *judge* ready to pronounce the guilty verdict; a *policeman* who is always on our trail; or a *dominating* and *authoritative* *father* (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* pp. 12-14). These false impressions of God are “like carrying a ball and chain around our feet,” which “God has to go to incredible lengths to dissipate” (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* p. 12). Keating concludes by saying that “The spiritual journey has great difficulty in getting off to a good start if we are carrying a load of unexamined and unquestioned negative attitudes toward God” (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* p. 14). “The Christian spiritual path is based on a deepening trust in God. If we are afraid of God or see God as an angry father-figure, a suspicious policeman, or a harsh judge, it will be hard to develop enthusiasm, or even interest, in the journey” (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* p. 1).

False ideas about God are not some new phenomenon in our modern society. The Gentile Christians were convinced that in order to make themselves acceptable before God they had to be circumcised and submit to the Mosaic law. In response to this untruth, Paul argued from the outset of this letter that, “we know that a person is justified *not by the works of the law* but *through faith in Jesus Christ.*And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus*,* so that we might *be justified by faith in Christ,*and *not by doing the works of the law,* because *no one will be justified by the works of the law*” (Galatians 1:16). Here, as the letter nears its conclusion, Paul uses the strongest language possible to reiterate this crucial point:

“Listen! I, Paul, tell you this: If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then *Christ will be of no benefit to you*. I’ll say it again. If you are trying to find favor with God by being circumcised, you must obey every regulation in the whole law of Moses. For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, *you have been cut off from Christ!* *You have fallen away from God’s grace*” (Galatians 5:2-4).

For Paul being right with God could not be achieved through human effort. So even if a person could follow every one of the Old Testament laws, it would never be enough to justify oneself before God. The only way that people are made right with God is through Christ’s death on the cross. So, when Paul’s Gentile converts were contemplating circumcision, they were, in effect, saying that Christ was not sufficient to justify them and that faith in him wasn’t enough. By focusing their lives on the law, they were relying on their own efforts before God. Jumping through the hoops of the Mosaic law was a religious act that they could do, but it indicated that they were no longer relying on God’s grace and Christ’s guidance for living the Christian life.

In the opening chapter of his book on centering prayer, Keating contrasts scriptural modes of spirituality with the faulty modes of spirituality that are pervasive within the Western church. One flawed attitude “is that the self initiates all good works and God rewards them. It brings to mind the image of battling in an arena to placate God for one’s sins or to win God’s favour, while God sits passively in the bleachers watching the contest. If we do well, it is thumbs up; if we fail, it is thumbs down. The gospel, on the contrary, teaches that God initiates all good deeds through the inspiration of the Spirit abiding within us, while we listen attentively and put into action what the Spirit suggests” (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* p. 3).

The Christian life is not lived in our own strength as we jump through the hoops of religiosity trying to achieve a certain degree of righteousness. It is quite the contrary as Paul writes, “*For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness*” (Galatians 5:5). “The Spirit dwells in us as the dynamic source of inspiration for all our good deeds, and we consent. The emphasis in the New Testament is on listening and responding to the Spirit rather than initiating projects that God is expected to back up, even though God had little or nothing to do with them” (Keating, *Intimacy with God,* p. 7). *Righteousness* is not something we can attain in our own strength. When we put our *trust in Christ,* God declares us *righteous* in his sight. His declaration of innocence upon us was not because we won the battle of good works in the arena. No, his “thumbs up” is all due to Christ’s death for us. Our righteous status before God is a present reality, yet *we eagerly wait for* *the hope of righteousness.* Righteousness also has an ethical or moral dimension, impacting our character and actions in the world. This too is a gift from God as he is at work in us by his Spirit as we live by faith in him. God has begun a good work in us; he is forming us into righteous people as his Spirit guides, develops and strengthens us. God’s work in our lives is an ongoing process that will culminate in the future as he brings it to completion on the day of Christ. This is the *hope* for which we eagerly wait. In the meantime, we live the live of *faith,* which, as Paul writes, expresses itself in *love* (Galatians 5:6).

**3. Conclusion: *Keep running the race***

Paul concludes this passage by comparing the Christian life to running a race. Paul tells us that the Christians at Galatia were running a good race, but the rival preachers cut them off and pushed them off the path to truth (Galatians 5:7). *So, let’s keep running the race of faith*. Keep listening for the call of God; the divine voice that coaches, directs, and encourages us to stay on track because there are a host of other voices that are trying to persuade us to take another route (Galatians 5:8).

*Let’s keep running the race of faith as free people in Christ.* Hear the words of Hebrews 12:1, “let us throw off *everything* that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

*Let’s keep running the race of faith with our eyes fixed on Jesus.* This will serve as a reminder to us that this race is not about human achievement, what we can do by their our own good works. Instead we must see that this race of faith is all about what God has done for us through the finished work of Christ.

*Let’s keep running the race of faith depending on God to strengthen us.* “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:29-31).