

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church      Pinole, CA

The Third Sunday after Pentecost: June 29, 2025

“Freedom in Christ”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the third Sunday after Pentecost, and also the Sunday before the Fourth of July, the day we celebrate America's independence.

And so fittingly, we have in our Epistle, a letter to the Galatians, a consideration about what it means to be free. For it begins “for freedom Christ has set us free.” But what exactly does that mean? I would like to begin with a quote from John Hanneman, a pastor in Palo Alto and Cupertino who sums up this scripture by saying:

*"We are prone to letting the heavy yoke be placed back on our shoulders. . . We can be seduced by any number of different voices. Religious leaders may charge that we are not living up to the "real" Christian standard; the world tells us we are worthless; friends tell us we disappoint them; parents say they will love us if we do better; spouses point out our faults and withhold their affection. When we hear these voices, we immediately are tempted to engage the work-ethic engine that insists, "I can do it; I can do it. I think I can; I think I can." We put our necks back in the yoke and try to earn approval through performance, placing ourselves under law once more."*

This is a very real danger that we might do this in our relationship with God, and he urges us to stand firm and resist it with all our might. We must not buy into the notion that we have to win acceptance with God by means of our performance. We must remind ourselves daily that Christ has set us free.

That freedom cannot be taken for granted; it must be vigorously guarded. It is not something that can be put in a bank vault and kept safe. It is not a privilege conferred, like an academic degree. Each day we must take up the stance of freedom once again. If we fail to protect it deliberately and consciously, freedom will be lost. We will be sucked into the earthly pleasures and find ourselves again unsatisfied. For the nature of humanity is to never be good enough. Whereas Christ accepts us as we are, forgiven and set free.

But we all know the saying, "with great freedom comes great responsibility". And so, Paul reminds us of all those things that we can fall prey to that would compromise our relationship with God, and therefore enslave us again.

The idea that freedom means the absence of encumbrances or hard decisions may be popular but it does not hold weight. Freedom is not the absence of entanglements; entanglements are the means by which freedom becomes meaningful . . . Freedom is not separation from relationships; it is not a protection from getting hurt when doing the right thing; freedom is a feature of relationships that becomes especially apparent as we model the love Christ modeled to us.

Put simply, freedom draws us into community. Galatians describes more of what that looks like. The call to freedom, according to Paul, and according to *Christ* is a call to love. The word for love Paul uses is *agape*. And it's a tall order.

This kind of love goes far beyond what the law demands. It is an all-encompassing way of life, constantly seeking to serve the neighbor. It is pure and self-less, and embraces a universal, unconditional love that transcends and persists regardless of the circumstance. *Agape* love is the highest form of love that reflects the love God showed to the world through Jesus.

Paul knew such love wasn't easy and that humanity is prone to use our freedom to dominate others in systems of oppression rather than in systems that hold each other in this kind of mutual holy love. He addresses the baseness of ourselves with a discussion of "the flesh," which for Paul was a way of defining the motivating factor for our actions or inactions. For Paul, living by the flesh was a self-centered living, in direct opposition to the God-centered living of a life guided by the Spirit.

And it doesn't seem like there is much middle ground. He pushed the Galatians to pick a direction, arguing you can't be both for yourself first and for God first. It just doesn't work that way.

How do we keep step? Perhaps we could use the famous "fruits of the spirit" list Paul includes as a check-list of sorts for what happens when we live into freedom. In our discernment of what we are supposed to do next, what would happen if we asked ourselves:

is this a response of love? Joy? Peace? Patience? Kindness? Generosity? Faithfulness? Gentleness? Self-control?

I imagine if I ran through this list every time I was trying to respond to a difficult situation or a difficult person, I might save myself from some less than favorable decisions, and my relationships with others would be a lot more loving.

Jesus in our Gospel today uses the occasion to speak about discipleship and about the implications of following him. As the text makes clear, Jesus is speaking to those who are indeed following him, not to potential followers. As he often does, he speaks in exaggerations for emphasis in making his point. He is saying, “Be willing to let go of the past.” You bury the dead and move on. There comes a time when you leave the comforts of home and the way you used to be, and let love lead you; no turning back.

The umbrella truth above this whole topic of discipleship and fruits of the spirit is that being a Christian and a disciple of Jesus gives us a whole new identity. We are no longer simply a biological unit on this earth, but a child of the God who created the whole universe. We now live knowing that “our citizenship is in heaven”. Because our lives are now measured by eternal things.

I wonder if we might think about Jesus’ words on discipleship and the true freedom given through his sacrifice that we can either be his disciple, or a disciple of our... nation, ...culture, ...family, ...etc. When we try to follow Jesus but still keep national views that are not loving, and cultural values that might keep us from seeking the kingdom, or placing more importance in how our family or friends think of us above how Jesus does, we are again taking up a slavery position. The one who resolutely set his face to Jerusalem tells us today that he will have none of it. Follow him and don’t look back.

As this week roles out the celebration of our Nation’s freedom, enjoy yourselves! However, know that it pales in comparison to the freedom Christ has given to us. The freedom Christ has given us transcends time, nation, culture or any earthly measure. In Christ you are worthy – God loves you and that is true freedom. Wherever you find yourself this week, put forth the fruits of the spirit, celebrate with love and let freedom ring. Amen.