

I like the last phrase of our Galatian passage this morning. It sums up Paul's feelings towards the Galatian congregation: "*I am perplexed about you.*" I reread this after watching an interview with several of the adult members from the religious compound in Texas. Their children had been taken away by the State of Texas and this was their first public interview. My thoughts after hearing the interview were the same as Paul's, "I am perplexed about you." Now, I don't see this as a judgment statement but rather a statement of perplexity, wonder, pondering, etc. "Why do you want to be enslaved like this? "Why do you want to live a life such as this?" It is perplexing, along with much of life.

We have been looking at the situation in Galatia over the past three Sundays (we have two more to go). The Galatians have discovered a relationship with the living Christ but are in danger of going back to their old life. They have been freed. They have moved from hopelessness to hope. They have moved from having no promises to having all the promises of God. They have moved from death to life. And, they are in danger of reverting back to live under the old ways—a perplexing situation.

Words are inadequate to describe what they have now found in Christ. I mean, how do you tell someone you have fallen in love? How do you share with someone you have found the love of your life? We can use lots of words and yet they don't seem to convey our inner emotions. The joy and celebration that comes when we fall in love. Paul has seen the Galatians fall in love. He knows how they feel but he is always aware that they are now in danger of reverting back to their old life. Back to slavery, to the keeping of rules, regulations, special days and diets. Max Lucado in his book, Come Thirsty, describes a town where the people are a bit strange. They like to push their cars! They get in them, start them and slide the gearshift into neutral and get out to push their cars to their destination. Sounds ridiculous right? This is Paul's response to the Galatian Christians. Why, after having been set free, do you want to go back under bondage? Why do you want to be a slave again? I am perplexed.

I wonder if we have changed? Do we disciple people to freedom or to slavery? Paul's words are that we are free in Christ. However, freedom is often difficult. We are not always prepared to be free. I remember being in a hospital room looking over the city. As we talked one of the family members pointed out a building a couple of blocks down the street. It was the dorm that his oldest son was living in. "See that building? Now go up five floors and across to the right two windows to the one with the closed blinds. See, it is noon and he is still asleep!" He is enjoying his freedom!

We know many young first year college students falter their first few weeks in college. We have not prepared them in high school for the freedom of college life. Seldom does anyone check to see if they have overslept and missed classes. The professors hand out a syllabus, may or may not go over it and then expect assignments, papers and tests to be done on time without hounding reminders. There are no notes sent home to say that John has missed his last four classes! They have freedom but are not always prepared for it.

We have seen this repeated in recent years in the collapse of communism in the Eastern block countries. They now are on their own and they don't know how to live in freedom after decades of an iron fist government. They revert back to their old ways, ethnic divisions, etc. We are well aware of the tragedies of such situations. They were not prepared for the freedom that they now have. This was Paul's perplexity of the church in Galatia.

Was freedom easy for Paul? I want to look only at what Paul tells us from his letter to this congregation. This afternoon, after the ball game, go and reread the first chapter, especially verses 11-24. Here Paul describes his conversion experience. Here is where we need Paul Harvey for the "rest of the story." Paul says that for three years he went away. What was Paul doing for those three years? Praying? Reflecting on Scripture? Seeking the advice of others? He has been transformed but what does this transformation mean? How is this different from his Jewish heritage, his training as a Pharisee? He was seeking to discover God's call on his life—he who was once bound by the Law is now breaking it!

There is always the danger of becoming enslaved again. Can you image a conversation between Paul and a new convert?

Paul: "You are now free in Christ. You are no longer a slave."

Convert: "Free? You mean I can do anything I want?"

Paul: "Yes, but..."

Convert: "Okay, here comes the rules and regulations."

Paul: "No, no. There are no rules and regulations outside of love."

Convert: "What do you mean, outside of love?"

Paul: "Love needs to our guiding principle. Before we act we should ask ourselves how our actions will affect the other person or our faith community. 'How will my action demonstrate the love and the freedom I have found in Christ?' When you answer this then you are truly free."

Convert: "Explain this again."

Paul: "We are freed from sin because of Christ and his love for us.

Thus, we need to ask ourselves how our actions will reflect on his love for us and for the world. That is all."

Convert (how Paul sees the Galatian danger): "This may all be too hard.

I'm going back to the rules and regulations that I am familiar with. I can't take freedom."

The Galatian congregation had shown a great love for Paul. He had come to them a stranger and one who was near death. Their love for Paul was so great they would have given him their eyes if it were possible. Can you imagine someone coming here this morning, a stranger, asking for a kidney from one of us? Would you be willing to give yours if it was a match? This is the depth of love the Galatians developed for Paul. Paul asks that they rediscover this love, this freedom in Christ.

H. E. Fosdick writes: "Before we can fully enjoy anything we must share it." It is the same with our freedom in Christ. As we have been set free so is it our task to set others free. We are to set them free, not to enslave them in more rules

and regulations. Recall Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees. It was not because they were not zealous in their faith. It was not because they were not committed to God. It was because of the burden they placed on converts and others in the faith (Luke 11:46ff). They put more of a burden on the shoulders of their converts than they had lifted. Paul urges the church not to become as they were.

In other words, there is no turning back from the freedom we have in the living Christ. Once we have set our feet on freedom's road we must learn to live in light of that freedom. We must begin to let Christ's freedom rule in our hearts and minds. We must learn what freedom is. It is not a life lived in hopelessness by trying to keep a multitude of rules and regulations, special days and feasts. It is a life lived under the influence of the living Christ. Who so loved the world he set it and us free. Setting us free to love as he loved, forgive as he forgave and trust in God as he trusted. From this there can be no turning back.