

Westminster Sermon – Commitments and Priorities

Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62

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Our first scripture reading is Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 5, verses 1 and 13-25. In this letter to a congregation he founded, Paul articulates the paradox of the freedom in Christ to which we have been called. As Moses freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to serve Yahweh, Jesus frees us from sin to serve one another...a metaphor especially meaningful in the context of our abolitionist roots. Hear now the Word of God.

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. 13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Amen.

Our second reading is Luke 9:51-62. Today's Gospel reading is the first in a series from the lengthy travel narrative. Here, Luke offers insight into the way Jesus dealt with rejection and the way Jesus understood commitment. Hear now the Word of God.

1 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive Christ, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village. 57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." 59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Amen.

The sermon title: “Commitments and Priorities”

The text: For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence... Galatians 6:13a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for the commitments and priorities which are a part of each of our lives and for the mysterious ways they simultaneously limit our freedoms and make us free. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

What a delight it is today to celebrate the *commitments and priorities* of the 26 youth and nine adult leaders who join Reverend Choi in a mission to Wise County, Virginia with Appalachia Service Project. We commission these young people of Westminster with affection, joy, and respect. We are grateful for the *commitments and priorities* of their parents and the adult leaders making this adventure in service possible. Today, we are “feeling good!” It’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life!

As we consider the commitments we each make in our lives, we are mindful that our priorities change and our freedoms are restricted because of those commitments. As Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem in Luke’s travel narrative, he shares some thoughts on commitments and priorities. He wants those who choose to follow him to know that the way holds no guarantee for safety and security and that the way expects a clear choice about priorities and a clear break with the past. The commitment to follow Christ and to prioritize one’s life toward that end is well worth the freedoms sacrificed along the way.

As we prepare to celebrate the independence of our country this week, it is good to reflect on what “freedom” means to those who follow Christ. Unlike contemporary connotations which understand freedom to be autonomy, independence, and sovereignty, in other words “to do as I please,” Paul has something else in mind.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.”

In other words, freedom in Christ does not empower us to do whatever we want without regard for the other or to become self-indulgent, aimless, lacking in self-control. The freedom Christ calls us to, paradoxically, liberates us to serve one another. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he contrasts the indulgence and enmity of a life lived in the flesh with the self-control and magnanimity of a life lived in the Spirit.

A few months before Dr. Glen Pittman died, he loaned the book Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to my husband Peter. Written by Gordon S. Wood, Friends Divided was named Wall Street Journal’s Best Book of 2017. It is the story of two founders, Adams and Jefferson, who shared a commitment to the independence of our country, yet whose differing priorities toward that end created a rift, a division, an enmity between them that would have lasted a lifetime if it had not been for their mutual friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush.

Dr. Rush was committed to mending the rent in the fabric of their friendship. He was saddened that their greatness, their magnanimity and the wonder of what they accomplished together in birthing this country was diminished by the *enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, and factions* between them and their political parties. This enmity began with differences of

opinion regarding American support for the French Revolution and climaxed with President Adams appointing several of Jefferson's political enemies to government posts before passing the torch to President Jefferson at the turn of the nineteenth century.

It would be a dozen years before these great statesmen communicated again through a common friendship and correspondence with Dr. Rush.

In 1809, Rush wrote a letter to Adams following a prophetic dream in which his son Richard gives him a history of the United States telling the extraordinary renewal of friendship and communication between Adams and Jefferson. In this dream, Adams writes a letter to Jefferson, Jefferson kindly returns the correspondence and their friendship continues to heal and to grow in *the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. The dream ends with these prophetic words:

These gentlemen sunk into the grave nearly at the same time, full of years, and rich in gratitude and praises of their country (for they outlived the heterogeneous parties that were opposed to them) and to their numerous merits and honors posterity has added, that they were Rival friends.

It was almost three years later, over New Year's in 1812, that Adams would finally extend that magnanimous olive branch to Jefferson. Both Adams and Jefferson expressed their deep appreciation and delight to Rush for their resurrected friendship.

How prophetic that ultimately Jefferson and Adams would die on the very same day, five hours apart at a ripe old age. How fortuitous that they would pass from this life to another on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1826.

How grateful are we for the commitments and priorities of our founders who birthed our nation, who shed the enmity, strife, and dissensions of the flesh, and who opened their hearts to the magnanimity of God's generous and forgiving Spirit! How grateful are we for the commitments and priorities of our youth as they birth a life of faith and journey in service and mission! How grateful are we for our creator God who gives us a Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control and for a Savior who leads us along the Way and invites us to follow with commitments and priorities! Amen.