

O God of wondrous patience, set us free from the tyrannies of habit and blame; shake from us the dusty melancholy of too much success and comfort; that, as if on the first day of creation, we may begin to see the miracle of life and humanity, to hear the hum of grace unfolding to meet all our needs, unexpectedly and surprisingly, and urging us to go on in faith to whatever is next in love. Amen.

Today we have the great joy and challenge of listening to, considering, and hopefully, taking into our hearts and minds, Paul's letter to the Galatians. I, perhaps like you, spent most of my life hating Paul and his narrow views on the abilities of women, his occasional self-righteous boasting. But, in my more mature years, I have come to love him. Yes, he still has lots of problems but what Paul did for us and for all people in all times is to absolutely nail what Jesus means to us and for us. He grasped what few other people understood in those early years after Jesus' death and still have a hard time grasping today – that our relationship with Christ is based on faith, not works, and therefore is pure gift, impossible to attain or achieve on our own.

Paul lays it right out in the beginning of this letter and here I am using the translation in *The Message* – “My authority for writing to you does not come from any popular vote of the people, nor does it come through the appointment of some human higher-up. It comes directly from Jesus the Messiah and God the Father... I am God-commissioned, I am God-commissioned.” That's one of the things that makes Paul's writings so compelling and real. It was his experience of God that is the bedrock of his writing – not something he learned in school or was taught by some elder – but his own experience of God – vivid and real.

What Paul wants us to know most in this letter is that we were created out of the freedom of God's love to live in the freedom of God's love. Freedom is the core theme of this letter and what a great theme on this Sunday before we celebrate the 4th of July.

Part of Paul's experience was that he was born and raised a Jew – a super Jew as he described himself in his letter to the Philippians – a Hebrew of Hebrews.

No one followed the Law as scrupulously as he did.

He wrote, "I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how and enabled me to do it...

Indeed I have been crucified with Christ, I have been crucified with Christ."

Strong words, but then Paul never did anything half way.

Paul discovered, as Martin Luther discovered 1500 years later, that no matter how many good deeds we do, no matter how pure our lives are, we cannot earn a relationship with God.

I can't stress that strongly enough – we cannot earn a relationship with God, despite the church's message to the contrary over the past 2000 years.

It is not a system of punishments and rewards.

It is not us doing a good enough job to approach God.

It's God who takes the initiative towards us.

There is only God – creating, redeeming, and sustaining us – out of pure grace.

If there were a system of merits and demerits, what would it look like?

You, Kathy, gave 10 cans of green beans to MetroCaring but you, Bob, only gave 9 cans so Kathy goes to heaven and you don't!

No matter how you add it up, no recordkeeping system makes any sense.

So if it isn't about earning God's love, if it isn't about accumulating enough credits so that you stand before those pearly gates

and not the flaming entrance to hell when you die, what is it about?

It is about this struggle inside us between, as Paul puts it, flesh and spirit.

Paul presents them as opposing forces

and encourages us to live by the Spirit and not by flesh.

He lists examples of the works of the flesh

and contrasts those with the fruits of the Spirit.

This dualistic model – flesh v. Spirit –

hearkens back to that even more ancient Platonic model of body v. soul –

where the body was considered corrupt, imperfect, and the soul pure and eternal.

Plato was the first to propose that our souls live on even after our bodies die and decay.

So with this Platonic idea in the back of our minds,

when we hear Paul's descriptions of flesh v. Spirit, we overlay it with the idea that flesh is the body and soul is the Spirit. We then move on to the deeply embedded and very unfortunate understanding that our bodies are bad and our souls are good. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the word for flesh in Greek is sarx, which sounds an awful lot like sex! So we have come to believe that the things we can see and touch –matter, our bodies – are bad and only the invisible world of soul and spirit is good.

But, but, - and here I want to acknowledge the always inspirational work of Richard Rohr and Thomas Keating – a better translation of Spirit and flesh is true self v. false self, true self v. false self. What does that mean? What are our true selves and our false selves? One brief definition is that our true selves are who we know we are and our false selves are who we think we are. Our false self is the self we operate out of most of the time, I'm afraid. It could be defined as the potent combination of id and ego. It is that part of us that still operates out of those early biological needs we had as babies and children, the need for security and survival, power and control, and affection and esteem. Those needs were legitimate and necessary for us to survive infancy and early childhood. Unfortunately, no matter how wonderful your parents were, they weren't able to satisfy those needs completely and so we enter adulthood with some or many of those needs for control and security and affection still unmet. We aren't fully aware that these needs are still powerfully churning away inside of us, driving us to do all kinds of things to satisfy them. And so we live most of the time out of that fragile false self – that self that is characterized by neediness, insecurity, woundedness, seeking praise, taking offense too easily. I think of it as that child at the swimming pool, waving its arms on the diving board and calling out to its mother – Look at me, mom, look at me. If these characteristics of neediness and a hunger for praise remind you of a certain high elected official, you are right on.

BUT, remember, we are ALL operating out of our false selves most of the time. Donald Trump is just one of the most spectacular examples of the false self in action.

What is our true self, or Spirit, as Paul puts it?

Our true self is the person we know ourselves to be in the eyes of God – loveable, redeemed, connected, held in the strength and mercy of God’s arms forever.

Our true self is that mature part of us that is not continually manipulated by those early emotional programs for happiness.

The true self does not operate out of the human ego with its unrelenting needs for prestige and power.

It operates out of the divine “I”.

It knows that there is a bigger more real divine self in each of us and it seeks a connection with that divine self

through prayer, contemplation, breath, a connection with the natural world.

Its characteristic is not insecurity and neediness but abundance, abundance.

This tension or struggle between the false and true selves is at the core of our baptisms.

There we die to our old selves, the false self, and are reborn in the life of Christ, the true self.

We are, as the BCP says, “buried with Christ in his death... and we are reborn into the new life of grace.”

So this struggle between the false and true selves involves real death.

It is not easy. The desires for control, security, and esteem are so strong.

It is only the much stronger power of God that can put them in their place.

Finding our true selves requires ruthless self-examination,

a clear awareness of all we do and our motivations for those actions and a practice of connecting to the divine on a regular basis.

But all of those are only secondary to the primary way to the true self which is desire.

When we discover the constant dissatisfactions that leading a life centered on power and prestige bring, its insatiable demands, our inability to ever meet those demands, then we can turn our attention and energy to the only thing that does truly satisfy, the gift of God’s love,

that is constantly flowing towards, around and inside us.

We need to have our own personal experience of the inadequacy of living out of our false selves before we are ready to seek God out as the only real source of wholeness, the ground of our true selves.

It is only when we discover that we can't do it by ourselves, that we are ready to turn to God.

It is only when we know that more stuff, a more important title, the latest smartphone, can never, ever satisfy our deepest longings, that we shift our focus and energy inwards to the ground of our and all being.

That is all that is necessary.

When we offer God that desire, when we can come to God and say, the stuff of this world is only an illusion, it can't satisfy,

only you, God, can,

then God can take that desire and shape and weave it into a relationship with us that does sustain, that does satisfy, that does meet our deepest longings.

When we give up the pathetic amount of control we think we have

and see the truth that it is only God that is ultimately in control,

then we can seek God out with our hearts, minds, and bodies,

not content to settle for anything other than the real thing.

I found a wonderful quote from Episcopal priest and theologian Mark McIntosh,

“Christ's dying and rising has opened the way for us to live into

the continual conversion from life dominated by fears, compulsions,

and self-regarding desires to a life that draws its freedom and clarity

from the living spring of God's free giving.

Otherwise...everything will sound with only the petty shrill clamor of one's cravings or fears rather than the deep resonance of the divine voice.”

The wonderful thing about Paul is that although his false self intrudes from time to time in his letters,

he operated out of the freedom and clarity of his true self most of the time.

That freedom meant he didn't care if he made enemies, irritated people.

He didn't care if his life was at stake.

As long as he was faithful to his call to proclaim this new amazing message

of the gift, the free, unearned, always breathing inside us,

gift of God's love in the person of Jesus,

then he would continue to write and travel and preach as long as he could. (Tina)

Listen again to the beginning of the passage we heard today

in a more contemporary translation,
“Christ has set you free to live a free life. So take your stand!
Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you,”
and I would add, the slavery of the false self
with all its whiny needs and demands.
We were created to live in the free gift of God’s love. Take that gift.
Don’t settle for anything less. It is the only gift that can truly satisfy.