

Text: Gal 5.1-13
St Stephen's

June 30/July 1, 2007
Sat/Sun

Set Free! Live Free!

This week we celebrate another **birthday of America**. I have never been more **grateful** to be an American. But at the same time I have never been more **concerned**.

At Gettysburg, President Lincoln said that we are "*testing whether this nation can long endure.*" Don't you feel as though we are **still testing**? Will this century be our last? I wonder. Are we near our end or at a new beginning? I wonder.

I think it very much depends on how we answer **a critical question**, the question, "**What is freedom?**"

It is a question that has currency around the globe. It was back in 1941 that President Roosevelt famously talked about

*'freedom of speech everywhere,
freedom of worship everywhere,
freedom from want everywhere, and
freedom from fear everywhere.'*

Those freedoms have long been at the heart of the American experiment and the vision of civic life in the Western democracies. These are very important freedoms.

But if you just walk down the street and ask any teenager or 20-something **what freedom means to them**, they will say something like, "*Freedom is doing what I want, when I want, the way I want, where I want, with anyone I want.*"

But **this is a freedom that can destroy freedom...**

Let me explain... These are two of my dogs. And we have a third, too.



They want to be free. They want to come and go as they please and run through the neighbor's yards and out on the highway, but I built a fence so they couldn't.

They want to chew up the shoes and tear up the rug and jump on the couches and sleep on the beds, but I won't let them.

They want to jump up on people, but if they do, I put them away from our guests.

They would like to leave little "puppy pods" in surprising places around the house, but I have house trained them so they won't.

Here is the problem. If I will let them do everything they would want to do, **their freedom will destroy them.** They will be impossible to live with. Expensive to live with. And no one will want to come to my house anymore. Not friends or kids. And eventually these puppies will **die young,** on some roadside somewhere. So **I boundary their freedom in order that they might have freedom.** I became their pack leader. And we had to get that straight! And now they are very happy dogs.

Romeo actually is a **refugee.** He went to Cleveland with my Cate, but **lost his freedom.** He got voted out of the house by all Cate's roommates because he smelled too much and messed too much. His 'freedom' led to getting him voted 'off the island'. **There is a freedom that can make life impossible,** that can get you voted off the island. So Romeo came back to me and joined my pack, and he has become a

very nice dog.

Freedom flourishes within the boundaries of broadly affirmed set of public values. That's why one of our most beloved national hymns has these words: "*Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law.*" For centuries, the **10 Commandments** have served as the core of those values in Western Democracies. Today, we are living through a **systemic attack** on that moral vision and those boundaries. We just might find that when we are through, civic life is almost impossible, that the household becomes unmanageable.

Doing what I want, when I want, the way I want, where I want, with anyone I choose.. **isn't a virtue.** It is swapping our the responsibility of freedom for the little self-centered world of "me". It's not "liberty" for my puppy to run out on the road. It is death!

Real civic freedom is a precious and expensive gift. "Freedom don't come free", Toby Keith sings. This week we celebrate our independence and **honor those who secured it, who protect it.**

*freedom of speech everywhere,
freedom of worship everywhere,
freedom from want everywhere, and
freedom from fear everywhere.'*

The freedoms we celebrate in America are important. Valuable. Worth fighting for. Worth dying for. And I want to tell you how deeply grateful we are with a son in combat in Afghanistan for your love and support. I am certain that I speak for all our military families who feel the same way. We live upon your prayers, upon God's faithfulness, and upon the confidence that our son has responded to God's call. From the bottom of my heart, I thank all of you.

But all these freedoms are **not enough.** Not enough at all. Let me explain...

To take **the example of my dogs again,** give them any opportunity

and they will revert to their wild behavior. If they are in the back room and I am in the front room and the house is quiet, within 2 minutes they are back on the couches. If the gate is left open six inches they are gone. If I am out of the house and they get into the kitchen, they will take a trash bag and tear it apart, looking for anything edible, or inedible. They are **totally unconverted**. The only reason they behave like they do is because I have put restraints on them. But their doggy hearts are not changed. Not at all.

What God wants is people who can be so transformed that if they are left totally alone, if they have **no boundaries** (no rules, no laws, no ten commandments, no external restraints), if they have **no one watching**, they are **totally trustworthy** - they are a solid force for His purposes in the world. They are people who want what He wants, who love what He loves, who can deal with difficulty or temptation or circumstance. Faithful. People who are like Jesus. Jesus is the best picture we have of a free man.

I have noticed – have you ever thought about this – that when **Jesus** came to set people free, he **didn't take on the political oppression** of the Roman empire. Most of his contemporaries expected that when the Messiah came, he would break the yoke of the Roman oppression. But Jesus never went at it. Isn't that interesting?

I think it is because **he had his sights set on a greater oppression**, the oppression inside us, not the oppression outside us. He knew that if he broke the oppression of sin inside us, in due time the oppression of governments and tyrants would give way. If he destroyed the power of the big tyrant, the little tyrants would fall. Civic and political freedom depend upon the greater freedom of the heart that Jesus brings. Remove the gospel from the life of a nation, and tyranny will follow.

Do you remember the story of the Lord of the Flies? The story of a bunch of British Schoolboys marooned on an island, who quickly throw off their civilization and revert to a brutal, evil, tribal darkness. Why? Because the beast inside them had been untamed, untouched, untransformed by their years of schooling. It had only been covered up. When you pull the

covers back, it is still there. That is the tyrant that Jesus has in sight...

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1 (RSV)

The Gospel comes, and chains are broken. Christ comes with his grace, his life, and

scarred hearts are healed – no matter how deep the scar...

the past is forgiven – no matter what the past has been...

relationships are mended – no matter how large the offense...

and the God who once seemed so distant is now closer than the air you breathe.

The terrible burden of earning, always incessantly earning approval from God and people is lifted by the wonder of his freely given love...

The terror of death that overwhelms with fear is itself overwhelmed by the bright promise of the resurrection...

Do you catch the double use of the word 'freedom'? You have been set free for freedom. Set free to live free. Free to serve – anyone. Free to love – everyone.

You don't have to go back to the tyranny of sin. You can live free!
 You don't have to go back to the tyranny of self. You can live free!
 You don't have to go back to the tyranny of external rules and regulations. You can live free!

Like civic freedom, Gospel freedom is **an expensive gift**. This week as we celebrate our political independence and **honor those who secured it, and who protect it**, take some time to **thank God** for your gospel freedom, and for the one who gave his life to free you from sin, and for those who passed on this freedom to you.

And maybe Independence Week would be a great time to **talk to**

someone who hasn't found this freedom yet, this wonderful freedom from guilt and freedom from the power of sin inside and this wonderful freedom to come into the presence of God for the help we need...

And maybe if you don't yet know this greatest freedom of all, this could be an Independence week for you. Real freedom, gospel freedom, is just a prayer away. He is that close....

Let's pray to Him now...