

As Free as a Bird!
[Text - Galatians 5:1, 13-25]

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*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free!
I wish I could break all these chains holdin' me....*

That modern song, beautifully sung by Diane and Dave, expresses an age-old desire: the desire to be *free*. Throughout human history, countless wars have been waged in the quest for freedom, including our own War of Independence. Additionally, countless personal battles have been fought in the attempt to achieve an inner, spiritual freedom. Even those of us who live in a land of political and personal liberties, find numerous things that can bind us up and hold us captive - things like our past failures, our present problems, or our future fears - things that can enslave our spirits and keep us from living fully and freely.

In this morning's New Testament reading, Saint Paul writes, "Christ has set us free, so that we might fully experience that freedom! Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." These words are written to a Christian community that has tasted the fruits of freedom. They received and embraced the Good News of the abundance of Divine love and grace, as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. And initially they delighted in that liberating Gospel - trusting that God's love for them, and for others, was theirs to share, fully, freely and unconditionally. Unfortunately, however, some fly-by-night preachers had recently come among them and convinced them that they weren't really saved, or acceptable to God, unless they followed all the Jewish laws - such as only eating certain foods, observing ritual festivals, and being circumcised. Suddenly, their new-found freedom and ebullience was being stifled, stunted, and [literally] cut-off! Basically, they began to question whether Divine love and grace was sufficient to bring them wholeness and redemption. So Paul unequivocally reminds them - and us - that the only "law" that we must follow is that we 'love our neighbor as ourselves.' For if we truly love our neighbors *and* ourselves, we won't indulge in those

destructive behaviors that can entrap us - like hatred and immorality, jealousy and bitterness, envy and strife. Instead, we will joyfully and freely pursue the Life-affirming way of the Spirit. Of course, the problem we sometimes have with living in the freedom of the Spirit is that we've been programed to question our own ability to determine what is good and right and wholesome. And when we're told that God is a stern and judgmental Entity to be *feared*, it can be difficult to trust in God's unconditional love for us and for others. Like those Galatians, we may find it easier to acquiesce to the constraints of prescribed behaviors and moralistic restrictions, rather than stand firmly in the freedom which Christ offers us.

This is why it's so important for us to remember and take to heart Paul's profoundly liberating words: "Christ has set us free, so that we might fully experience that freedom! Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery!" Now admittedly, there *can* be a certain comfort that comes from the constraints of a religious legalism - of having a strict code of predetermined "do's and don'ts". However, Jesus Christ doesn't call us to be comfortable; he calls us to be caring and compassionate, open and free! Free to live as genuine daughters and sons of our gracious Heavenly Parent. Free to taste and to share the fantastic fruit of the Spirit - "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against these things", Paul declares, "there is no law!"

Well imagine that! You and I can be as loving, joyful, patient and kind as we want - as often as we want! We are free to practice these virtues and to cultivate this fruit without holding-back. And can we do this, not as a way to appease a wrathful Deity or to earn Divine favor, but because we ourselves have already tasted and experienced that liberating power of Divine Grace.

A grace that allows us to move beyond our past failures;

A grace which sustains us in our present-day concerns;

A grace which sets us free from future fears, because we trust that whatever the future brings, the love of God will see us safely through it.

And that is definitely a freedom worth celebrating every day of the year!