

Homily for Proper 8, Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
preached at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque  
June 26, 2022  
by the Rev. Neil Elliott

“For freedom Christ has set us free; therefore do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

I'll return next week to this morning's Gospel reading, but it seems appropriate today to dwell on the apostle Paul's message to the churches of Galatia.<sup>1</sup> He speaks of freedom—he emphasizes it; “for *freedom* Christ has set us free.”

I

It may be tempting to think we've got nothing to learn here; to respond to the apostle, “hey, Paul, we get it. We're Americans. We're all about freedom. We practically invented it. We hold the patent.”<sup>2</sup>

But if we're honest, freedom in America today is something like the equality enjoyed in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*—some of us are *more* free than others.<sup>3</sup>

We cherish freedom of speech. But now we learn that spending money to elect and re-elect office holders counts as “free speech,” so corporate lobbyists pouring billions of dollars into an election cycle are just exercising their

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<sup>1</sup> More important than the hoary old question “North or South Galatia?” is the recognition that the Galatians—*Galatai*, in Greek—were descendants of the once-expansive Celtic empire—the *Keltai*, in Greek; and that their constant representation in Roman imperial iconography as a conquered people, much like “cigar-store Indians” in the United States, is the broader context for Paul's letter. I depend here on Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-imagined* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), and Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, George W. Bush could only explain the attacks of September 11, 2001, as happening because enemies “hate our freedom.” In fact Osama bin Laden had clearly and frequently stated that his motives were contempt for U.S. policies in the Middle East, including long support for Israel's occupation of Palestine and subjugation of Palestinians. See Phyllis Bennis, ed., *Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader* (Interlink Books, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (UK, 1945).

freedom. Ordinary citizens can't dream of matching that money—though we're constantly told we're not being good citizens unless we try.<sup>4</sup>

That corporate “freedom of speech” is money well spent. It guarantees that the price of everything from medicine to gasoline is left to corporations to decide. Pharmaceutical and oil companies have made record-breaking profits, quarter after quarter, and spent it on hiking up the price of their own stock. *That*, we are told, is the glorious “freedom” of the “free market” at work, so there's nothing anyone can do about it (but we should blame the president, anyway).<sup>5</sup>

Freedom of speech can be really violent, we're told. A massive insurrection at our nation's capitol led to the deaths of nine people, five of them Capitol Police, and more than a hundred and fifty police officers injured. One political party has dismissed the Select Congressional Committee's investigations because there's nothing to see here; all that happened on January 6 was “legitimate political discourse.”<sup>6</sup>

Freedom of speech is why some people holding public office claim the right to spew falsehoods and defamation on social media and even incite others to

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United vs. Federal Elections Commission*, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Joe Biden campaigned on moving to alternative energy and addressing climate change; after the defeat of the “build back better” legislation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine disrupted global oil markets, Biden appeared to abandon campaign priorities and embrace US oil companies as the solution to global problems—blameworthy, in some eyes, but not a cause for higher gas prices. Oliver Milman, “Exclusive: oil companies' profits soared to \$174bn this year as US gas prices rose,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 6, 2021; Cathy Bussewitz, “Exxon profits surge despite \$3.4B hit from Russian exit,” ABCNews.com, April 29, 2022. The president of Accountable.US pointed out that the orgy of profiteering spread far beyond the oil industry: “Blame greed, not supply chain, for those profiteering prices,” *Albuquerque Journal*, March 26, 2022; Amy Westervelt, “The U.S. Government Doesn't Control Domestic Oil Production. But It Should,” *The Intercept*, March 11, 2022. As a Biden administration official prepared remarks to Congress that would cast light on corporate profiteering, the testimony was quashed by conservative members of the Council of Economic Advisors as “bad politics”: no one objected that the testimony was false.

<sup>6</sup> The Republican National Committee declared the Jan. 6, 2021, riot “legitimate political discourse” on Feb. 4, as it censured Reps. Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for participating in the Select Commission to investigate events leading up to the day's violence.

political violence; in Missouri, a candidate for the Senate invites us to grab a weapon and go “RINO hunting.”<sup>7</sup>

Unlike other merely constitutional rights, our freedom to carry battlefield weapons around in public—is God-given, we are told. The rights of children or their parents or teachers or nurses to go to school or work without dread of losing what feels like a national mass-shooting lottery: that freedom is not so God-given, so completely negotiable. The rights of state legislatures to try to safeguard their own citizens—surely a conservative value embraced by the Supreme Court!—well, if it’s about regulating guns, no.<sup>8</sup>

The freedom of women to exercise autonomy over their own bodies? Not God-given: so, dispensable. Having their equality with men written into the Constitution? How quaint.

If one Supreme Court justice had his way, the freedom of any woman or man to love—let alone to *marry*—another member of the same sex, or to practice contraception with a spouse of the opposite sex—might be up for grabs.

The freedom to talk in a public school about the history of conquest and slavery in shaping our nation, about the reality of racism in our society, about the reality of sexual diversity—that’s not a God-given freedom for the teacher *or* the student.

“Freedom” in the United States seems to depend a lot on who you are, or who you know.

## II

I realize I’m talking about contemporary realities that make many of us profoundly uneasy. And I’m talking about these realities *from the pulpit*, which can make some of us even more uneasy. *Shouldn’t the clergy stick to church stuff,*

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<sup>7</sup> I refer to the television ad with which former governor Eric Greitens’s launched his campaign for the U.S. Senate. I’m sure his call to “hunt” less extremist members of his own party—holding a shotgun while leading a SWAT team armed with automatic rifles—was meant in good fun.

<sup>8</sup> Supreme Court, *New York Rifle & Pistol Assn. v. Gruen*, 2022.

*stick to Bible stuff,  
stay in their lane?*

To which I answer, first: through General Convention—made up of clergy and lay delegates and our bishops—the Episcopal Church has taken clear, direct, and consistent positions on all these issues—otherwise I wouldn't mention them from the pulpit!—and commended them to our attention, prayer, discernment, and action as congregations.

This *is* church stuff. I am in my lane.<sup>9</sup>

And second: I have spent my professional career studying and writing and teaching and preaching about the ways the Bible is interpreted in public life in this country.<sup>10</sup>

- When plantation owners wanted to hire a preacher to explain to their slaves why they should be docile and obedient, there was a raft of Bible verses for that.
- When Blacks suffering under Jim Crow and organized terror marched in the streets and sat on buses and at lunch counters demanding their rights as human beings, whites—including moderate white clergy—explained that they had to get up and get back to work and wait, patiently, until whites got around to making things better. There were verses for that.
- When rich white legislators need to explain that nothing can be done to help the poor, that single mothers with hungry children simply have to get (another) job, but millionaires deserve ever more tax breaks, there are verses for that.
- When men have explained to women why they should keep their voices down, why they didn't need the vote, why they had to obey their husbands,

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<sup>9</sup> The national church's Office of Government Relations is at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations>. The Public Policy Network is at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/office-government-relations/eppn-sign-up>.

<sup>10</sup> This is the focus of *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

why they had no right to divorce, certainly no right to ordination in the church, no right to make their own reproductive decisions—*we'll decide that for you, and No*—there are verses for all that.

- When we, or our sons and daughters, our coworkers or neighbors, are harassed and humiliated in school, ridiculed or fired from work, compelled to live in the closet because we are called an “abomination,” “objectively disordered,” and told that “God hates” us because of whom we love—there are verses for that.

Esteemed feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza declares that every Bible should come with a warning label, “DANGER: CONTENTS MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.”

This *is* “Bible stuff.” I am in my lane. And I will not relinquish this lane to the extremism of the religious Right.

### III

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” says Paul. “Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery,” He is not talking about Judaism or the Jewish law; he is talking about the oppressive weight of Roman imperial religion and ideology.<sup>11</sup>

The Galatians had once been a proud empire, until Rome had defeated them; now the Romans gloried in images of the Galatians vanquished. Once the members of the Galatian churches had turned their backs on the gods of Rome, they were in a precarious position. They sought quick cover in Jewish practices: without *becoming* Jews, they wanted to “pass” as exceptions to what Rome required.

Paul’s response is pretty direct: “Stand fast.” Perhaps better, Be adults. “Stand on your own two feet.”

We know—because we have a paper trail—that some early churches took Paul’s language about freedom, his warning not to return to slavery, seriously.

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<sup>11</sup> In what follows I represent the arguments of Kahl and Lopez, mentioned above.

They organized manumission societies, gathering money to buy slaves out of slavery and set them free.<sup>12</sup>

That was alarming enough to other Christians that they invented another paper trail, writings under Paul's name that insist slaves should *not* expect to be set free but should serve their masters all the more. Those fabrications—the polite term in the scholarly literature is *pseudepigrapha*; if you or I tried it, we'd be accused of forgery—made it into our New Testaments.<sup>13</sup>

Paul's attitudes toward women were complicated: he thought remaining unmarried like he was made for a simpler life in a troubled time; he also commended his women mission partners as his equals, even deferred to them; he insisted women had the divine right to pray and prophesy in the assembly. That, again, was too much for other Christians, who made sure those same pseudepigrapha put women in their place—and may well have slipped into 1 Corinthians an extra couple of verses telling women to stay silent in the assembly.<sup>14</sup>

As for Paul's supposed condemnation of homosexuals as deserving God's wrath—a number of scholars agree Paul said nothing of the sort. He's been the literary victim of the same malicious heterosexism that injures our neighbors today much more seriously.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> An important argument made by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Critical Reconstruction of Early Christian History* (New York: Seabury, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Any decent introduction to the New Testament will identify Ephesians, 1 Timothy, and Titus as pseudepigrapha; most will include Colossians as well. Those are the only letters in which slaves are ordered to "submit" to their masters.

<sup>14</sup> The so-called "household codes" in the previously named letters command wives to be subject to their masters. In 1 Cor. 7 Paul sets his own unmarried life as an ideal, superior to Christian married couples, but repeatedly qualifies his argument; he seems to be "thinking out loud" (perhaps in the presence of Prisca and Aquila, his married colleagues). A number of scholars regard 1 Cor. 14:33-34 as an "interpolation," inserted surreptitiously into the manuscript tradition of Paul's letters. Paul regards Junia (Rom. 15:7) as his superior (Greek *prostasis*, "patron") and notes that his fellow apostle Prisca was "in Christ before me."

<sup>15</sup> The text in question is Rom. 1:24-27. My claim to national fame is to have been mentioned in a *Newsweek* article in 2008 in connection with *The Arrogance of Nations*, published that year. My argument concerning Romans 1 was older (*Liberating Paul*, 1994) but did not garner the attention of other scholars until the later book.

I don't mean to make this sound like an academic lecture in critical Pauline studies. I *do* mean to offer a Pauline challenge.

It's easy to come to church wanting to leave the disturbing realities of the real world behind us, to seek to float back through time to stand there before Jesus, simple, untroubled. Indeed, some of us were taught in seminary that it's our job as clergy to make that happen.<sup>16</sup>

But to borrow a phrase from Galatians: We need to *be adults*, to *stand on our own two feet*. Not try to "pass" as Jesus' innocent contemporaries.

Twenty long centuries, filled with slavery and war, imperialism and colonialism, oppressions intimate and systemic, separate us from the time and place of Jesus. We can't ignore those realities and expect an authentic encounter with the living God.

"You were called to freedom," Paul warns, "but do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." Rather, practice that paramount commandment, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's at the heart of our baptismal covenant: we promise to resist the forces of evil that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, to respect the dignity of every human being.

The "fruits of the Spirit" Paul names aren't magical attitudes we wait for God to give us; they are what we might call *virtues for the long haul*: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. May those practices flourish among us; and may we become the instruments of God's justice and peace in this tumultuous world.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther sought in his preaching to make Christ "present" to the hearer; Ignatius of Loyola sought the same thing in his Spiritual Exercises. Karl Barth considered such contemporaneousness the goal of the theological interpretation of scripture. N. T. Wright considers it his distinctive advantage to achieve it, regularly ("some of us *know* Paul").