

Galatians 6:1-10,14-18 – July 3, 2022

Tomorrow, we celebrate Independence Day. The birthday of our nation. The celebration of freedom. Freedom from tyranny. Freedom of speech. And the press. And assembly. And, most importantly for people of faith like us, freedom of religion.

We, in the LCMS, have always had a strong appreciation for the freedoms this country gives us. Our church body is kind of a classic story of people finding refuge from religious persecution by going to America. Our church fathers fled from Saxon Germany in the mid 19th century because of an oppressive ruler who tried to dictate how they worshipped and what they believed.

And when we came here, we were another classic story of an immigrant community that pulled itself up by its bootstraps. We arrived in Missouri with next to nothing. Just a plot of really terrible farmland on the Mississippi River.

But we built homes and schools and churches. We built a college and a seminary and a publishing house. And while we did all of this physical labor, we were also building a spiritual foundation for our church body.

Such that other Lutherans around the country heard about those Missouri Lutherans and wanted to have fellowship with us. And soon we had a synod that stretched throughout the midwest. And, eventually, throughout the nation. So we have a lot to be thankful for on Independence Day and we have a lot to be proud of as well.

It's easy to look at all the persecution, hardship, and physical labor that we endured and think that it's proof of what Paul says in our Epistle lesson. *"Whatever one sows, that will he also reap."* That's kind of a central tenet to the American dream, isn't it?

Good things happen to good people. Hard work yields rich rewards. God helps them that help themselves. We are a country of people who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and carved out a nation.

And yet, that's really not what Paul is saying here. Not that Paul is against hard work. Quite the opposite. But Paul is teaching a very different set of priorities here than the rugged individualism and self-sufficiency of the average midwestern American.

The Epistle before us today comes from the very end of the letter to the Galatians. The lectionary has been working through virtually this entire letter for the past few weeks. And what we learned all the way back at the very beginning was that the Galatian church was conflicted.

You see, Galatia was a region in what we now call Turkey. And although it was a heavily Greek area, it wasn't that far from Palestine, and so it also had a strong Jewish presence as well. Which meant that the Christian church there had people who had converted from Judaism and it had people who had converted from pagan Greek religion. And these two groups of Christians really, really didn't get along.

As a result, Paul spends most of this letter explaining how Christ has united Jews and Greeks. How he has fulfilled the Jewish Law. How he has brought God's grace to gentiles. How works of the flesh like circumcision no longer matter, because we are saved by faith in the work of Jesus Christ.

It's beautiful theology. Martin Luther loved the book of Galatians. If you ever want to read a commentary of Martin Luther's, read his Galatians commentary. It's fantastic.

But now, after proclaiming this Gospel message for the past 5 chapters, Paul wants to spend this last chapter applying it in a practical sense. Taking all of this theology that he has taught and saying, 'This is how it looks in real life.'

And it certainly doesn't look like former Jews arguing with former pagans over whether or not they're circumcised. Or whether or not they follow the ceremonial law of Moses. Or whether or not they follow Jewish traditions and customs.

No, quite the opposite. Instead, it looks like Christians bearing one another's burdens. Paul doesn't say what kind of burdens these are. The context immediately before it is that of resisting temptation and restoring people to the church. So this could be a reference to forgiving one another and supporting them in their spiritual struggles.

But, honestly, I think he's vague on purpose. Because there's a whole host of burdens we can bear. Spiritual burdens like forgiveness, yes. But also physical burdens, like physically helping someone after a major surgery. Financial burdens, like financially helping someone who has just lost their job. Emotional burdens, like emotionally helping someone who just needs a shoulder to cry on. These are the burdens we bear for each other.

St Paul says that in this way we fulfill the law of Christ. Not the law of the Old Testament. Not the ceremonial laws that the Jews and Greeks of Galatia had been arguing about. No, the law of Christ.

The law of Christ that doesn't distinguish between Jew and Greek. It simply says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love your neighbor as Christ has loved you. Bear their burdens the way that Christ bore the burdens of your sin. How can the weight of their burden compare to the weight of the cross that Jesus carried? How can the weight of their burden compare to the weight of your sin and death that Jesus carried to the gates of hell and conquered once and for all?

And yet, at the same time, Paul also reverses all of this and says, basically, bear the burdens of others, but don't intentionally try to be a burden to others. *"Let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load."*

You can't carry someone else's load if you can't even carry your own load first. So make that your first goal. If you see someone helping you carry your load, be grateful that God has put them in your life. Thank them profusely. But then start working to carry it yourself. So that maybe, down the road, you can help carry their load when they need to share the burden.

It's this constant give and take – and give some more – that's at the core of what it means to be a church. To be the Church. Unlike the American dream to work hard and be successful for your own benefit, the Christian dream is to work hard and be successful so that you can help someone else. So that just as God has blessed you with love and mercy and grace and every good gift of body and spirit even though you didn't deserve it, you can bless others regardless of whether or not you think they deserve it.

And it's important to remember that. Important for both us as individuals and us collectively as churches. Because how we think about those blessings, how we use those blessings, has a huge impact on us spiritually.

And this gets back at that verse I quoted earlier. *"Whatever one sows, that will he also reap."* Paul describes those blessings that God has given you as being like seeds to be sown. But we have a choice where we sow them.

We can sow them to our flesh and reap a harvest from the flesh. Our own wants and needs and sinfulness. Our selfishness and lust and envy. And, in the end, we will reap nothing but corruption.

Or we can sow them to the Spirit and reap a harvest from the Spirit. We can sow them to bearing our neighbors' burdens. To helping the church here and around the world. To sharing the love of God with a friend.

And, in so doing, we will reap a great harvest. A harvest that comes not from ourselves, but from the Spirit of God. Working in those hearts and lives that we have touched with God's love. And bringing about a harvest of eternal life. Not just to us, but to all of them as well.

We know that will happen, because we ourselves are part of that harvest. We have eternal life because Jesus Christ sowed his own life to the Spirit. He did not think of his own needs, but only of ours. And in his crucifixion we have eternal life.

And so now, as those who have nothing to boast about except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, we do the same for our neighbors. Our neighbors in the church. Our neighbors in our community. Our neighbors in the world.

We are a new creation who walk by the law of Christ. A law that says, "If you have an opportunity to do good to someone else, then do it." Regardless of whether they are Jew or Greek. Man or woman. Rich or poor. But especially if they are part of your own household of faith called Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Not because by doing it, you earn the grace of God. But because by doing it, you reflect the grace of God. I say to you in this service and many others, "The Lord be with you." And then you say in response, "And also with you." Or, if we're in setting three, "And with thy spirit."

Why? Because we are the reflection of the Lord's grace. God shows grace to us. We show that grace to others. And they receive that grace from us as if it were from the Lord himself.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters, this day and always.
Amen.