



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

JULY 3, 2016

## Know Your Rights John 8:31-36; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

On a couple of occasions, I have played a relay game with the youth where we begin with a simple task like moving a stack of books across the room, one at a time, or placing pencils into a cup. It's always a job that an average toddler could accomplish pretty easily, but, of course, there's a catch. Before they begin, a different limitation is placed on each team. One team is asked to complete the task while blindfolded, another with hands tied behind their backs or feet tied together, while another is told they can only walk backwards. One team, however, is allowed to complete the task with full use of their eyes, hands, and feet with no limitations.

Of course, it is not difficult to guess the outcome of the game, and that the other teams quickly cry "foul" when the team without imposed limitations completes the task in far less time than those who cannot see or walk or use their hands freely. It is a silly game for teenagers, but it makes its point well: We are more likely to succeed when we are free. Just as our bodies have difficulty accomplishing even the simplest tasks when a part of us is bound physically, so our hearts and minds and souls cannot fulfill their highest longings or hopes or dreams when they are not free to function without restraint.

We are designed by our Creator to be free. Our nation's Declaration of Independence proclaims that each of us is endowed by our Creator with rights that cannot be taken from us and against which no state should impinge. The New Testament tells us that we are free to follow our conscience (1 Corinthians 10:29), free to love God and others (Galatians 5:13-15), and in Christ free from bondage to our sin (Romans 6:18). Because God wants good gifts for us as his children, Christ sets us free for the sake of freedom itself (John 8:31-36), and wherever we find the Spirit of God, Paul tells the Corinthian Church, there we find freedom (2Corinthians 3:17). Yes, we are made to be free.

While we are designed for freedom, it is also clear that unrestrained liberty in the hands of limited, sinful people, without any boundaries is a recipe for disaster. As a nation, we are still relatively young, in the scope of human

history, in negotiating a society defined by liberty. It is inevitable that, at times, my rights and freedoms will bump up against yours, so it becomes necessary to develop laws to help mediate those instances. We elect representatives who will draft laws to outline those boundaries and have a system of courts to arbitrate when there are disputes. Of course, this sermon is not intended to be a civics lesson, but these concepts are foundational for us as Baptists. We have a strong Baptist heritage of advocating for a "wall of separation" between Church and state, and yet we acknowledge that our liberty has a deeply theological basis: It is a gift from God rooted in our fundamental belief that God loves us enough to grant us this kind of freedom because the inherent worth and dignity of each person created in God's image requires it. God gives us this freedom because God understands that faith or devotion that is coerced is not sincere but that faith in Christ is best lived out without externally imposed restraints but through personal conviction and commitment. In order for faith to be genuine it must be free to be experienced, explored and practiced by the individual as he or she responds to the call of God and the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Although the Apostle Paul and the Galatian Church did not live in, and likely could not even conceive of, a society built on the assumption that every person is recognized as free and equal, Paul did advocate for this sort of freedom before God. He also understood that in spiritual matters, which for him as a follower of Christ were the most important matters, we are created for freedom and that the gift of freedom brings with it great responsibility.

There were some among the Galatians who were insisting that in order to be accepted into the Church, one must first convert to Judaism and be in full compliance with Hebrew Law. Paul, however, argues that in Christ we are redeemed not by law but by grace, saying that we are not required to submit to the burden of the law because Christ, by his grace, has indeed set us free.

But Paul very quickly adds that our liberty doesn't come with license and admonishes the Galatians not to misuse their freedom. You see, it is not that freedom isn't subject to any parameters or restraints but that in Christ, we subject ourselves to what we might call the law of love: We become slaves to one another in obedience to Christ's commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So Paul says that in Christ our freedom stops where the law of love begins. It is not our place to restrict the rights or liberties of another; rather, we limit our own freedoms and subject ourselves to the needs of those around us. Paul understands that the blessing of liberty demands a kind of self-restraint and a self-awareness that calls believers to give where we could

easily take, to take a stand for the sake of another when it could be safer or easier to mind our own business, and sometimes to sacrifice our own interests for the good of others.

Whether in our society or in the Church, whether two millennia ago or today, this business of freedom and rights and responsibilities is risky and complicated. Knowing when to defend my own freedom or stand up for my own rights and when to put aside my self-interests for another person or for the common good is a fine line to walk. Even without greed or pride or stubbornness getting in the way, as they too often do, we sometimes face the challenge of having the rights of two individuals or groups being at odds with each other and someone having to mediate in order to preserve as much dignity and liberty for each as is possible. These questions are perplexing enough on an inter-personal level, but when we confront such challenges on a societal or even global scale, we can quickly become overwhelmed with an enormity and complexity which confound us.

We like to think, as I suppose all generations do, that whatever we face is bound to be the most difficult, the most dire situation in history, and that the crises of our time are worse than anything our ancestors knew. While we may have unique challenges because of our particular time and place in history, I'm not convinced that our struggles are any greater or more perilous than those which came before us. Defending against tyranny, standing for justice, extending rights, and preserving liberties is difficult and daunting work, and it is a struggle that each generation must undertake for its own sake and for the sake of those who come after us.

The temptations of a people seeking liberty are the same as those Paul addressed in his writing, and they are the same ones that our forebears in this great nation and in other lands that have achieved liberty have fought against, and they are the same ones that we, as people of faith, continue to labor to overcome: that in our shortsightedness and self-interest—in our sin—the demand for our rights and freedoms is too often made without the necessary willingness to claim the accompanying responsibilities. As Paul warned the Galatians and us, too often the gift of freedom, which we are granted through God's grace made known in Christ, becomes an opportunity for self-indulgence rather than a call to obey the law of love, that is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So what does following this law of love mean in terms of our rights and freedoms? We can speak in vague, theoretical terms, but when we face the tough issues of our time, how do we figure out how to navigate the treacherous waters of rights and responsibilities? How can we, even though

we may have the right to do something, determine whether or not it is the right thing to do? When should our demand for rights give way to demonstrating compassion, showing kindness, or displaying sensitivity?

For example, I have a right to keep the money and property I have earned for my own comfort and pleasure, but as a follower of Christ who recognizes that every good gift comes from God's generosity, when is it right for me to give generously, even sacrificially, to meet the needs of the poor and hungry?

I have a right to fly a flag symbolizing the heritage of my ancestors, but is it compassionate for me to do so when I know that it is also a symbol of the oppression of my neighbor's ancestors?

I have a right to believe and express certain interpretations of scripture in regard to sexuality, but is it loving for me to voice those opinions in ways that claim God's judgment on LGBT people or which incite violence against them?

I have a right to bear arms, but am I being responsible with that right to advocate for unfettered access to all kinds of weapons or to magazines that will fire hundreds of rounds of ammunition in a matter of seconds?

I have a right to worship God in any way I choose, to apply my faith in any area of my life that I deem relevant, or not to worship or acknowledge God at all, but, as Paul asks the Corinthians, should my conscience limit another's freedom?

Just as the youth demonstrate in the game we play, there are many factors which can bind us and hinder our freedom, whether they be external circumstances beyond our control or the consequences of our own choices, forces like injustice or violence or economic insecurity which may at their core be quite far removed from us, or fears and anxieties and self-doubts that are at the very core of who we are. Any or all of these can limit our freedom and prevent us from experiencing the full and abundant life God has intended for us.

Perhaps we cannot change or eliminate all of the yokes that bind people, or even completely liberate ourselves from the fetters in our own lives, but a life in Christ will be lived out in the responsible freedom which gives of itself and follows the law of love. Our demand for rights as citizens should never eclipse our responsibilities as followers of Christ, and our freedoms include the liberty to place the good of others above our own concerns. And

if we as followers of Christ live by the Spirit and are guided by the Spirit, then, as Paul promises the Galatians, we will know the freedom of lives filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Herbert Spencer, the 19th century British philosopher and political theorist, said, "No one can be perfectly free till all are free." If this is true, and if Christ's law of love calls us to liberate those who are bound by feeding the hungry, meeting the needs of the poor and oppressed, standing against systems of injustice, making peace in the midst of violence, and bringing hope and light wherever we find despair and darkness, then how can we—any of us—be truly free while our brothers and sisters remain bound? How can any of us know freedom while so many suffer oppression and fear and need? How will we know the freedom of plenty while a quarter of our children go to bed hungry? How will any of us realize the freedom of knowledge while over 11,000 students in our state drop out of high school each year? How can any of us own the freedom of good health while chronic disease and inadequate access to health care plague not just people on the other side of the globe but too many of our own citizens in the wealthiest nation on earth? How can we claim the freedom of peace while weapons threaten us not just on the battlefield but in airports and cafes and night clubs and even in places of worship?

By now you are probably thinking that I have raised many questions without offering many solutions. I confess that is true and that I do not believe there are easy answers to any of these questions. But I do believe that our faith in Christ calls us to ask them, to ponder what they mean for our own time and place and for our responsibility to love our neighbors as ourselves. And then our faith compels us to use the freedom we are given to set about praying and speaking and teaching and advocating to find answers, to work for a day when we are perfectly free because all God's children are truly free, not by reliance on our own power or ingenuity or resources, but by the power of the Spirit who guides us and gifts us, and in the name of the Christ who by his grace has set us free indeed! Thanks be to God!

O God who is the Creator of nations and the Granter of liberty, we come to offer our thanks and praise this day for the freedoms and blessings we enjoy in this great nation. Our hearts are filled with gratitude for the freedom to work, to learn, to speak, to worship. We thank you for men and women who sacrifice so much to secure liberty for us and for peoples around the world. We thank you for family and friends who give our lives meaning and purpose. We thank you for the glory of your creation which testifies to your power and your love for us. We thank you that you invite us into your presence around your table and call us to live as your children.

Even as our hearts fill with gratitude because of the blessings of life and liberty which we enjoy, our hearts break because of the overwhelming needs in our world. Too many of our brothers and sisters in the human family suffer persecution because of religious or political convictions. Grant us courage to work for their freedom, knowing that none are truly free until all are free. Too many around the world suffer because of hunger, disease, or violence. Give us hearts of compassion and spirits of peace that the needs of others might move us to respond. Too many in our own community feel the pain of loneliness or despair. O Lord, so fill us with your generosity and hospitality that they cannot help but overflow through our lives, that our actions and attitudes may bring healing and reconciliation. Make of us messengers of your hope and love and agents of your peace, O God of all the nations, with the assurance that by your grace, we can bring light and life to a dark and hurting world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister