

IV LENT 2016

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

FATHER CRAIG LOONEY

GALATIANS 4.21

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Freedom to love...is our unearned and unconditional gift from God...and our Action Item...to be applied in the same way to others.

Most of us think of freedom as the right to come to Mass unimpeded, to move about town as we wish, to vote according to our conscience, or to say or do almost anything we want as long as someone else doesn't get hurt. We think of freedom as a Constitutional guarantee...words written in pen and ink on a piece of paper that say we are free.

Saint Paul talks about true freedom when he writes to the Galatians to correct some false teaching in the Church community. He tells them they are preaching a "different Gospel"...not the Good News about God's love and our freedom from sin and death. Paul, as we have learned, never minces words and he writes,

"You foolish Galatians! Who put a spell on you? Before your very eyes you had a clear description of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross! Tell me this one thing: did you receive God's Spirit by doing what the Law requires or by hearing the gospel and believing it? How can you be so foolish!"

The kind of freedom Paul is talking about is not the kind of freedom written in pen and ink on a piece of paper like the Bill of Rights...it's the kind of freedom that originates in the heart...our hearts...the freedom to love unconditionally! Because God loves us...we must love too!

Paul had a vested interest in the Galatians. It was a Church community he helped found. Galatia was a Roman province in central Asia Minor...present day Turkey...settled by immigrant Celts some 300 years earlier. Paul was their missionary bishop.

The Galatian Church had gotten itself wrapped up in religious legalism and false teaching by a group within the Church community that was saying in order to be a good Christian one had to first be a good Jew and keep all of the Law. That got Paul's attention and he replies: Wrong!

Paul then tells a story about Abraham and Sarah, slavery and freedom, and God keeping his promises that would have resonated well within the Galatian Church but is largely lost on 21st Century Christians. Paul's point: as good as the Ten Commandments are...and they are the Ten Commandments...not the ten suggestions...Jesus is better...because he makes them come true.

What we should try to get out of the story is just as God kept his promise to Abraham and Sarah when Isaac was born, he kept his promise to us and has set us free from sin and death through the life, work, death and Resurrection of his Son, Jesus. And freedom from sin and death leaves us free to love!

We hear just how much God loves us at every Mass, "For God so loved the World that he gave his only Son...for us!" We experience God's unconditional love for us in Word and Sacrament. We may quite properly call the Church our Mother. Mothers nurture and guide us and keep us out of harms way. It is often said the Mass is the way we experience heaven on earth...in the present...in the here and now.

Paul wrote many letters to churches with the single purpose of reinforcing the Good News about God's love and compassion as Jesus has made them know to us. His letters commend the various churches for doing good works, and when necessary correct false teaching. Paul called the Galatians "foolish"...perhaps a harsh word but said out of love...to get them back on track...to make certain no one gets left behind.

We read Paul's letters because they are speaking to us. It's the job of all of us in the Church to point the way to what Paul calls our true Mother...Heaven. It's the job of the Church to make certain everyone hears the Good News and no one is excluded, unless they want to be excluded.

Freedom to love...we didn't earn it...it is God's unconditional gift to us...and it comes with an Action Item...love others...just as much as he loves us!

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