

Meditation 1: “God, Shed Your Grace On Us”

If ever there was a time, America, when you needed God to ‘shed some grace on thee,’ that time is now.

In various hotspots throughout the nation, confirmed coronavirus cases continue to rise at an exponential rate, pushing local health care systems to their breaking point. Experts warn that outbreaks of this magnitude anywhere in the country pose a threat everywhere in the country... and that without a change in the current rate of transmission, our nation could reach the threshold of 100,000 new coronavirus cases each day. God, shed your grace on us.

Throughout the nation, in cities large and small, protestors continue to gather to advocate for change in public policy, policing practices, and funding priorities. We hear George Floyd’s chilling last words -- “I can’t breathe” -- but more and more, we hear them as part of a lamentable pattern, an alarming chorus. More stories, more cases, more videos come to light. We question the values of those immortalized in our statues and monuments, and we debate over the best ways to remember, and honor, and learn from our history. Our nation grapples, yet again and yet in a new way, with our original sin of racism. God, shed your grace on us.

Throughout the nation, these fears and tensions rise to a fever pitch... because this is, after all, an election year. In an election year, everything gets politicized. Lines are drawn. Fingers point. Mud slings. Fear and tension grows. How much longer ‘til November? God, shed your grace on us.

That’s where we are in this nation, at this moment, on this weekend. It’s 4th of July weekend, right? Independence Day weekend. It’s the holiday when we as Americans celebrate that summer in Philadelphia in 1776 when a bunch of founding fathers (and a disappointing lack of founding mothers) came together to proclaim some

self-evident truths. This weekend, as we set off some fireworks and grill up some burgers, we celebrate those truths. We celebrate equality. We celebrate life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We celebrate independence. We celebrate freedom.

Freedom. This weekend, we celebrate freedom -- with hot dogs and sparklers and fireworks, if necessary. We celebrate freedom. We think about freedom. We pride ourselves on our freedom. Let freedom ring!

For those of us who identify both as Americans and as Christians... I wonder what our faith can teach us about what it means to be “free.” I wonder what our faith can teach us about how to live, and live well, in this “land of the free.”

That’s what we’re going to be talking about today. That’s what we’re going to be seeking in the scriptures. That’s what we’ll be taking to God in prayer... starting now:

Prayer

Meditation 2: “Freedom for a Purpose”

As we think about what it means to “be free,” what it means to use our freedom, what it means to live well in this “land of the free,” we seek wisdom from the words of scripture, from the book of Galatians:

[Galatians 5:1, 13-14, NIV]

¹ It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ... ¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The book of Galatians is where we find some of the apostle Paul's greatest hits. The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). "Let us not become weary in doing good" (Galatians 6:9). "You are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). There's good stuff here in Galatians. Stuff that'll preach. Stuff like... freedom.

Paul talks about freedom here. In particular, he's talking about freedom made possible through the work of Jesus Christ, freedom from the constraints, expectations, and obligations of the Jewish Law. And that's a common enough theme for Paul -- after all, Paul is the divinely-appointed / self-styled "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13, NIV). He focuses his ministry on those who are not part of the Jewish faith. (It's Peter and some of the others who focus their ministry on those who follow Jesus while remaining in and keeping the practices of the Jewish tradition.) Paul primarily writes to those who are not, and have never been, Jewish... and so it's not much of a surprise that he writes of what it means to follow Jesus outside the traditions of the Jewish Law. *You're free*, Paul tells his Galatian audience. *You're free from the specific expectations of the 600+ commandments of the Law. The Law isn't how you're made right with God. The Law isn't how you'll live in relationship with God.* He writes: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us [-- set you --] free" (Galatians 5:1, NIV).

In Christ, they've been set free! There's a "but," though. A pretty significant "but." He writes: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence" (Galatians 5:13, NRSV). Essentially: *You're free, but that freedom doesn't mean you can just do any old thing you want. In fact, even though you're not obliged to follow all the commands of the Law, you should still be guided by the very spirit of the Law.* And what is the 'very spirit of the Law'? The same thing Jesus referenced when someone asked him to identify the greatest commandment of the Law: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14, NIV).

Love your neighbor as yourself. Just that simple. Just that hard.

Here in this passage, as we read over the Galatians' shoulders, we learn that Christ has given us a gift of freedom, a gift that has come at a great cost. This gift is ours to use... but it's not ours to use in any old way we want, and it's certainly not ours to use in ways that are selfish, self-focused, or self-indulgent. It's ours to use for a specific purpose: to "serve one another humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13, NIV).

Prayer

Meditation 3: "Living Free, With Purpose"

As Christians, we are free. Our freedom came at great cost. Our freedom comes with great purpose. That purpose is to serve, to love, to use that freedom for the sake of others.

And as Americans, we are free. It's a whole different kind of freedom... but that freedom, too, came (and continues to come) at great cost. And that freedom, too, comes (I think) with great purpose. Perhaps... with the same purpose: to serve, to love, to use that freedom for the sake of others.

Lately, there's been so much conversation -- heated conversation, really -- about rights and freedoms, especially related to the crises we're facing as a nation. *Do government officials have the right to require us to wear masks? Or abide by curfews? Or submit to temperature checks? Or (eventually) get a vaccine? Do government officials have the right to prevent us from opening our businesses? Or meeting in certain-sized groups? Or gathering in large crowds? When does 'protecting public health and safety' cross over into 'curtailing individual freedoms'? Where's that line?* The answers to those questions

aren't simple, and they aren't clear... and while they've become politicized, they're not straightforwardly partisan, either. You probably have some opinions on those issues. Lord knows I do, too. But I, for one, don't feel fully equipped to answer those questions (especially from the pulpit, and especially for you); after all, I went to seminary, not law school.

Ah, that's right. I went to seminary, not law school. And in seminary, I didn't learn much about constitutional law or executive power and overreach. In seminary, I learned about scripture and Galatians and freedom in Christ. In seminary, I learned: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13, NIV). That's what it means to live in freedom as a follower of Jesus Christ... and perhaps that's what it means to live in freedom as a citizen of this nation, too. Perhaps that's what it means -- or what it should mean -- for me to "be free," to use my freedom, to live well in this "land of the free."

So maybe when I think about wearing a mask, it's not about whether the state or local government has the right to require it, or whether I have the freedom to refuse. Maybe it's about me choosing to use my freedom for the sake of others, to protect others, to love others by wearing a mask. That's my choice, at the moment... my free choice.

And maybe when I think about going out in public -- whether by eating in a restaurant, or marching in a protest, or going to a family gathering, or attending a rally -- maybe it's not about whether the "powers that be" have the right to determine where I can go, or whether I have the freedom to determine where I can go. Maybe it's about me choosing to use my freedom for the sake of others, to protect others, to love others by limiting my contact with others. That's my choice, in this season... my free choice.

I have freedom of speech, I'm told, right there in the Bill of Rights. How can I use that freedom for the sake of others? At times, it may mean choosing to speak out against what is unjust, or to speak up for policies or reforms that may benefit others more than myself. At times, it may mean choosing to be silent, so I can listen to someone else speak. Perhaps that's what it means for me to use my freedom for the sake of others, to serve others, to love others. Either way it'll be my choice, my free choice.

It's 4th of July weekend, friends, a star-spangled-freedom kind of weekend. On this Lord's Day in the midst of this star-spangled-freedom kind of weekend, the scriptures remind me: freedom isn't just something we have. It's something we use. I can't speak for you... but for me, as someone who is simultaneously a citizen of this nation and a citizen of Christ's kingdom, I want to use my freedom well. I want to use my freedom in Christ well. I want to use my freedom as an American well. I want to use my freedom to "serve [others] humbly in love" (Galatians 5:13, NIV).

And lo and behold... whether it's my Christian freedom or my American freedom, it may just be that "using it well" means the very same thing.

Prayer