

*Sermon for St. John the Baptist, June 26, 2016; by Rev. John Perry*

## **Black-footed Ferrets, and Christian Freedom**

I wish to look at today's passage from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, focusing on Paul's understanding of Christian freedom. In the letter he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." He also says, "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:1, 13, 16)

I'll begin by sharing a story from our recent trip across the country.

This is about something I learned while talking with Park Rangers, and from reading the local papers, while we were in Wyoming and Montana. It is about black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs, and about some particular ranchers.

Black-footed ferrets are small members of the weasel family. Their range was the prairies of the west, where they preyed exclusively on prairie dogs. As more and more of the far-western prairie came to be used for ranching, prairie dogs became scarcer, as ranchers considered them to be a menace and sought to control them; their burrows caused many serious injuries to cattle and horses. This led to a severe decline in the population of black-footed ferrets – to the point, not long ago, when they were thought to be extinct.

Then about twenty-five years ago a small remnant population of black-footed ferrets was found in a remote part of Wyoming. A captive breeding program was launched, and before long black-footed ferrets were being reintroduced to selected State and National Parks.

Ranchers have every interest in maximizing the profit they can get from their land; for all that their land holdings tend to be large, their margins can be quite thin. So it is astonishing that very recently, a couple of ranchers in Wyoming have set aside portions of their land where they make no efforts to control prairie dogs. They even have welcomed biologists in to inoculate those prairie dog populations, against diseases to which prairie dogs are subject, in order to promote a healthy ecosystem. The purpose of all this was to further the reintroduction of black-footed ferrets, now for the first time onto private lands, thanks to those ranchers.

Personal freedom is a really big thing, out West. Those ranchers were free, of course, to do whatever they wished with their land. Free, as we commonly understand this term. But in another sense, they were freed *from* the impulse of acting always to maximize profits, for that to be their only goal. They were freed to act also *for* the benefit of the ecological community, of which we all are part.

Turning back to Galatians, Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." In this passage, I think Paul is showing us that freedom is not an absolute; but rather, it is more a matter of freedom *from* something, and freedom *for* something. As it was, with those ranchers.

Paul's is a freedom *from* Jewish Law, and a freedom *from* "the flesh." His is a freedom *for* love; a freedom *for* life together in community.

When Paul talks about freedom, this is not about rugged individualism. The freedom he speaks of, is not personal autonomy. It is freedom from specific things, specific forces. Earlier in this letter, Paul focused on freedom from Jewish Law. Here, his focus is on freedom from the impulses and demands of what people in that time, referred to as "the flesh."

When he says, "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence," he is warning us to be on guard against an attack by an external, hostile power. "Flesh," to Paul, is a sinful power to which we human beings become vulnerable, a hostile power outside ourselves, that opposes God, opposes how God wants us to live.

We hear him say, "Do not gratify the desires of the flesh," and we think we know what he means. We're sure he means sexual misdeeds, a topic our culture is thoroughly saturated with. But this is not about sexual behavior alone, or even primarily. Yes, he includes sexual sins in the list of specifics he has, further on in this passage, but this is because such sins fall, among many, more important others, within a much larger context.

When he uses the term, "desires of the flesh," 'desire' in the Greek is actually *singular*, not plural: "desire of the flesh." This is an over-arching concept; "the flesh" is a comprehensive term for the entire sphere of autonomous fallen humanity. It refers to that force, that tries to drive us to act in ways opposed to God's will. "Flesh" asserts itself when self-seeking human desire opposes itself to the divine will, opposes itself to the wholeness of the community. We give in to this force – which Paul says is an *external* force – when we say, "This is what I want for myself; I don't care about anything else, or anyone else."

Flesh will try to manifest itself through the things in his list of specific offenses (Galatians 5:19-21). If we look at this list, these things are primarily offenses against the unity and well-being of the community; look at how he cites enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, and envy. Paul would say these are the false fruits of autonomy; this is what you get, when you mistakenly think that freedom, is about personal autonomy.

It is not; the freedom Paul speaks of, is freedom *from* that force. He says the way to resist this force, is to instead be led by the Spirit, and to live in love. "Through love become slaves to one another." The way to keep Flesh from gaining power over us, is through loving, mutual service.

When Paul contrasts Spirit and Flesh, this is not about a duality within the individual human personality. This is not a conflict between our sinful lower natures, and our higher, better selves. Rather, the war between Spirit and Flesh is between external forces; it is a cosmic conflict.

Through the language of this passage, Paul says that when we live in the Spirit, we join ourselves to Christ in this conflict. To live in the Spirit – to resist the Flesh – is to serve one another, in love, for the sake of the community. Christ has freed us, to do this. Paul's freedom, is for mutual service, in love; freedom for life together in community, under God.

Freedom *from* something; freedom *for* something.

Understanding freedom in this manner can be a very useful guide to us, in how we conduct our lives.

For one example, it may be helpful to so understand freedom, when we reflect on the recent tragic events in Orlando, whose victims we continue to pray for; and when we reflect on the struggle this country is having over the Second Amendment, the freedom to bear arms. Freedom is not an absolute, Paul would say. It is more a matter, of freedom *from* something, and freedom *for* something. Freedom for the benefit of the community, Paul would say. Freedom for a loving community, under God.

In all that we do. Especially here, in this community. Let's remember Paul's freedom. And stand firm in it.