

# CALLED TO FREEDOM

**Galatians 5:1, 13-15**

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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If any of you have ever lived or traveled in a country in which individual freedoms were trampled on, you know how precious the freedoms are that we have enjoyed in this country. I know this from my own experience. In 1988 my daughter Debbie and I traveled to the Soviet Union with a group of 300 other Chautauquans. This was not your ordinary tourist trip. This was a high-level Conference on U.S.--Soviet Relations, sponsored jointly by Chautauqua Institution and the State Department. But even with various ambassadors and Under Secretaries of State with us, we were still watched and listened to by the KGB and herded around by our Intourist guides as though we were cattle.

Let me give you just one simple example of life in the then Soviet Union. On the last day of our five-day conference in Tbilisi, Georgia, we had been promised an afternoon of sightseeing, with several possibilities offered to us. A bunch of us signed up for a bus tour to the ancient capital of Georgia about 50 miles from Tbilisi. Along the way we were also going to stop and see a thousand-year-old church.

After we saw the church and reboarded the bus, we started off again, expecting to go next to the ancient capital, which was the main attraction on this tour. Instead, the bus turned around and headed back the same way we had come, toward Tbilisi. Several of us noticed and asked our guide what was going on. She replied that the bus driver had been given orders to return to Tbilisi. No explanation was ever given to us about why we did not get to see what we had signed up for, and there was no apology. That's just the way life is in a society that does not value the individual.

I could give you other examples, but time does not permit. After 12 days of being continually frustrated by a society that did not value the individual, we were ready to return to freedom. On our last night in the Soviet Union, we were invited to the American ambassador's residence in Moscow for a farewell reception. One of the concert pianists with us sat down at the grand piano in the ambassador's elegant living room and began to play "America, the Beautiful!" and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." We all gathered as close to the piano as we could and sang our hearts out in praise of our country.

The next day, as our chartered flight approached the Washington airport, a professional flutist among us began playing patriotic songs on his flute; and soon the entire planeload of 300 Chautauquans were singing "God Bless America" as we landed in Washington. I'll never forget the goosebumps I felt and the tearful emotions of being so glad to be back in this land of freedom.

The freedoms we take for granted in this country are very special. They are built on our Judeo-Christian heritage, which can best be summarized by the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you want them to do to you." Or another way to say that is: "Love your neighbor as yourself," which the apostle Paul says in Galatians is the summary of the whole law. By loving our neighbor as ourselves, we are saying that every individual is important---not just those with money and power, and not just those like us---but every person: rich or poor, white or black, Hispanic or Native American, straight or gay, Christian or Jew or Muslim. Every person is important, and the needs of every person are important.

This week we will celebrate our most important national holiday, the one that lifts up Thomas Jefferson's stirring words: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson defined these three rights as "unalienable," meaning that they are fundamental human rights that cannot be taken away from any person. We reinforce that most basic American belief every time we recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. We say proudly, "With liberty and justice for all."

But do we really accord liberty and justice for all? Do we always guarantee life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to every person? Our conduct abroad in the last few years, that included the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, and the recently-exposed secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe, has shamed us in the eyes of the world and has caused us to question our national commitment to our stated ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But I'm also thinking about how we treat our own citizens.

In the days following September 11, many comparisons were made between that attack and the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. There were, of course, some similarities: a surprise attack, planes being used as weapons, casualties in the thousands.

Like some of you, I am old enough to remember Pearl Harbor. I was six and a half years old and in first grade. Even though I lived in Coral Gables, Florida, where there was no need to fear, I remember being afraid when we had to hide under our desks at school in bomb drills. I also remember being taught to hate the Japanese people---Japs, we called them---and they were caricatured on war posters as monkeys. I'm sure that was intentional so that we would view them as less than human, even as demons. That way we would not feel any compassion for them, not even for their children, when we bombed them. All people in this country of Japanese ancestry, even those who were native-born American citizens, were forced to leave their homes and live in internment camps until the war was over.

Eighteen years ago, I got to know two Japanese-Americans who were exactly my age and had both been born in California to second-generation Japanese-American parents. But their experience in World War II and mine were totally different. Shortly after Pearl Harbor they were each taken from their homes with their parents and other relatives and forced to live for four years in what they described as a concentration camp in California.

Years later, in Rochester, New York, these two men met and discovered that they had been in the same concentration camp in California as children. One of the men was the choir director in the church I served, and the other was the Presbytery Executive. By the time I knew them, they had worked through their bitterness at the way they had been treated by the American government, but occasionally they would talk about what it was like, as third-generation American citizens, to be thrown into a concentration camp in your own country by your own government, just because you looked like the enemy.

In the last few years, since 9/11, our government has treated some American citizens as terrorist suspects simply because they look like the enemy or have names similar to the terrorists from 9/11. I am deeply troubled by what I perceive to be an encroachment on our guaranteed freedoms. Our government's current practices of wire-tapping without warrants and accessing financial records of individuals without cause are, in my view, an illegal invasion of privacy. But

more than that, I fear that we are sliding down a slippery slope toward an authoritarian, dictatorial form of government. And this is not a partisan view. Senator Arlen Specter, Republican from Pennsylvania, expressed essentially the same concern last summer at Chautauqua. We hear a lot of talk these days about the need to establish democracy in other countries; yet, here in this country, I think democracy is currently in danger of being disestablished, and our freedoms, guaranteed by the Constitution, are being trampled on.

As we reflect on the freedoms we consider to be fundamentally important to our American way of life, let us recommit ourselves to making sure that those freedoms are guaranteed to all Americans, not just to some. Listen again to what the apostle Paul says in Galatians: “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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

We are called to freedom---freedom for ourselves and freedom for our neighbors.