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“Sinful Sundays”

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Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Years ago I was doing a children’s sermon on Freedom around the 4th of July and had the kids waving flags and saying “I’m free, I’m free.” After that was done, one little boy raised his hand and said, “I’m four, I’m four!”

“For freedom Christ has set us free” says the letter to the Galatians. I thought this would be a good thing to consider today, as we get ready for Independence Day this coming Friday. Freedom is a gift, and we so easily take it for granted. Most of us will never know what it is like to live without the freedom of speech, choice, assembly, worship, travel and so many other freedoms we never even think about.

Those of you who have traveled in communist countries know how much we take for granted. Freedom of the sort we enjoy is a luxury by global standards.

And yet, in some cases, freedom can be dangerous. Every dictator knows the dangerous nature of freedom, and that is why the first order of business of any dictatorial regime is to limit individual freedoms. Too much freedom can be a dangerous thing.

One of those things we will soon be free from is a certain “Blue Law” which was enacted to enforce moral standards by holding Sunday as a day devoted to worship and rest. Two economists have discovered that the freedom to treat Sundays just like any other day of the week contributes significantly to dangerous behaviors.

In two days, on July 1st, they are repealing Colorado’s law prohibiting the sale of alcohol on Sundays. So by next Sunday, you will be able to stop at the liquor store on your way home from church. I am sure that some Sundays you really feel like getting drunk after church, but I do not consider this a good thing. The freedom to buy anything or do anything on Sundays feels like an inalienable right to many Americans, but it really troubles me. Not only because I believe we need one day of the week that is different, a day devoted to rest, reflection and God, but this particular freedom has been proven to lead to a surprising increase in unhealthy behaviors.

Jonathan Gruber and Daniel Hungerman have studied what happens when states repeal those statutes that prohibit the Sunday sale of nonessential items such as appliances, furniture, jewelry, liquor and cigarettes. They’ve found that church attendance decreases, while drinking and drug use dramatically increase.

How many of you can remember when stores were closed on Sundays?

Before the nationwide shopping ban on non-essential items was lifted, 40 percent of people attended religious services, at least weekly. But once the stores were open on Sundays, church attendance fell to less than 30 percent. And instead of going to church, people are not just spending time with their families or working in their yards. Interestingly enough, marijuana use increases among church attendees, compared with those who never went to services, as do cocaine abuse and heavy drinking. So now I know what you do when you are not in church!

The blue law study indicates that when stores are open on Sundays, marijuana use increases by 11 percentage points among church attendees, compared with those who never go to services. Cocaine use increases by nearly 4 percentage points. Heavy drinking increases by over 5 percentage points. That is remarkable.

Economist Daniel Hungerman was quoted in the *The Washington Post* in 2006 as saying: "Treating Sunday just like any other day soon increases exposure to unhealthy behaviors and surrounds people with those who have no spiritual values. Repeal all of the blue laws, and soon enough Sundays will not represent rest or worship, but will become just as sinful as any other day of the week."

Now maybe you're thinking that this talk of pleasure-seeking has very little to do with you. After all, you don't smoke pot, snort cocaine, or go on alcohol-fueled binges. These are not part of your normal Sunday routine and I know that you are all good, moral people, and if you are in town and able, you will be in church on Sundays. I know that it is highly unlikely that you are going to wake up on a Sunday morning and say, "I think I will get drunk today instead of going to church.."

But making Sunday just like any other day is one more defeat for spirituality. I believe that we need one day of the week that is different, one day that we are supposed to focus upon God, faith, family, rest and renewal. One day when we do not do our usual rushing and running and producing, one day that really is a Sabbath day. We are losing it, in fact we lost it long ago.

For years now kids of all ages have been expected to participate in sports on Sunday mornings, since that is often the only time they can get access to High School Gyms. We have had plenty of Basketball and Volleyball Tournaments scheduled on Sunday mornings, and that is the case for kids involved in every single sport from Hockey to Baseball. All kinds of people are expected to work on Sundays, not just church professionals, but people from all walks of life work Sundays. So the repeal of the blue laws concerning liquor was inevitable, but I consider it one more blow to religious values and practice of spirituality.

Now, please do not misunderstand me. I am completely opposed to the legislation of morality, and believe neither church nor the state should tell people what to do with their time, energy or money. In a free democracy, people have choices, and everyone needs to decide for themselves how they will live their lives. You cannot legislate morality, you need to treat people like adults.

But I do think there is some wisdom to making one day of the week **different** by observing an intentional break from our ordinary routines. I think we are overlooking the sacred dimension of human life in our desire to make everything accessible to everyone 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something—anything, is better than doing nothing, and that any chance to entice consumers into spending, spending, spending is a good thing.

And yet our faith tradition tells us to deliberately set aside a time each week that is different, time devoted to God. The concept of Sabbath has deep roots in every spiritual tradition. In the Jewish tradition, Sabbath was modeled after God's example of creating the world in 6 days, and resting on the 7th day. If God needed a rest one day a week, then so do we!

Observant Jews take the concept of Sabbath quite seriously. The Jews knew that by keeping Sabbath they could maintain their closeness to God wherever they were, even in long and brutal exile from their own country. From sundown Friday to sundown Saturday they do not shop, work, or do their usual activities. In fact in some Jewish homes, you leave your car keys, cell phone, pager at the door on Friday evenings. There is no television, radio, it is a time of worship and rest, a time intentionally set aside for remembering God and the true purpose of life.. In Israel nothing is open on Saturdays, it's truly a Sabbath.

In the Muslim tradition there is a call to prayer 5 times daily, when all work ceases and people kneel toward Mecca and remember God.

In Christianity every Sunday was considered a resurrection day, a time devoted to the worship of God and God's victory over death in Jesus, as well as remembering the sacred dimension of all of life. Over the years Sabbath in the Christian tradition has come to mean a time set aside to help us to remember who we are—precious children of a loving God, created for more than our own self-indulgence, created for eternity. Nowhere else in this world are we ever going to be reminded of who we really are. Not consumers, not producers, but people created in the image of a God who loves us.

I think of the example of a woman with a hyperactive son. She hated the side

effects of all of the medications she was giving him, so she decided to use her own deep love for him as a primary treatment. Whenever Michael began to lose total control of his impulses she would scoop him up, put him in her lap, place his head against her chest and rock him and rock him until he could remember who he was. This is what Sabbath does—it rocks us in the arms of God until we can remember who we are. There should be a time set aside each week when we can sing, pray, cry, and remember who we are.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” says Paul. This spiritual liberty that our faith gives us is an inner freedom that strangely enough, brings peace and joy. Paul’s letter to the Galatians can be understood as a spiritual Declaration of Independence, because it frees the followers of Jesus from Jewish legal obligations and insists that we become right with God. Christian liberty is not a license to go crazy. When we are set free from the law, we are not given permission to do whatever we want. Freedom in Christ is freedom to do what Jesus wants — it’s a freedom that says, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

“You were called to freedom,” writes Paul to the Galatians; “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence” Don’t assume that faith in Christ gives you a blank check for the pursuit of personal pleasure no matter what the cost. Paul opposes this self-indulgent tendency freedom brings, and instead he recommends: “Through love become slaves to one another” He knows that if we are servants of one another, then we are not going to behave in selfish ways or abuse one another. “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He challenges us to love one another as Jesus loved us, and to serve each other as Christ served us.

So Christian freedom is not necessarily the freedom to do whatever we want whenever we want. The liberty we have as Christians is the freedom to love our neighbors and act as slaves to one another. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” says Paul. “There is no law against such things.” No one is going to put a limit on the generosity, the love, the joy, the patience and kindness that we show to each other and to the world.

The freedom to bless and be blessed—is the greatest freedom there is.

John Wesley said that there is no holiness but social holiness. As Methodists we have a common mission to transform the world at the places of its deepest need.

We come together each week to remember God's priorities for us and the world. We believe that our faith requires us to offer our lives in loving service to others so that our blessings will be multiplied by sharing. This is a part of our very DNA as United Methodists and the freedom Christ gives us to live lives that count for more than giving in to our own self-indulgence.

Bernie Siegel, the author of several books including *Peace, Love and Healing*, recommends the spiritual practice of asking ourselves "How would I behave if I was truly a Christ like human being?" Then, he says, you need to act that way. Identify completely with Jesus and then act like he did in turning the other cheek, meeting hatred with love, promoting peace, compassion and understanding. "I follow Don Quixote," says Siegel. "I view the world with love. I tell people to experiment with this. Judge no one you meet for the next 24 hours. Love everyone you meet and see. It's incredible how that changes your relationship with people. When you judge everybody — he's lazy, he's no good, he only wants money, he doesn't care about me — you project that, and you affect those people. When I walk around being loving, it's incredible how people respond."

It was two years ago that Warren Buffett, one of the world's richest men, decided to give 85 percent of his fortune to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to help cure the globe's most fatal diseases. It was an incredibly generous gift — \$31 billion dollars. But more significant than the size of the gift is the mission of the Gates Foundation. When Bill Gates was interviewed about the work of his foundation, he listed the reasons that people give for tackling global health problems including economic, national security, stability, etc.

But none of these arguments, Gates said, is the right one. The right argument for establishing this foundation, Bill Gates said, "...is that a mother's child is sick. And that child's life is no less valuable than the life of anyone else. And the world has plenty of resources to solve these problems if enough people of good will see it as their problem too. We wanted to use our vast resources and blessings to be a part of the solution, not the problem." And Bill Gates did just that this year by giving \$5 million to the United Methodist Churches program "Nothing But Nets" to fight Malaria in Africa.

So spiritual vales are eroding in our culture, and soon Sundays are just as ordinary as any other day of the week. And yet it can be different for us.

We have the potential to do more good than we ever imagined possible, if we take the time to regularly remember who we are, and who God is.

So as we think this week about what political freedom means, let us also consider our spiritual freedom to go crazy **not** with liquor or laziness or self-indulgence. Let us consider our freedom to receive all of God's spiritual gifts and then in turn to shower the world with those gifts which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and generosity.

The ability to live lives that count for something lasting and significant is the true meaning of the freedom we have in Jesus Christ.