

## **“Freedom’s Fruits”**

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**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**First Congregational Church of Haddam**

**Higganum Congregational Church**

### **Galatians 5:1, 13-26**

*“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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”*

At the end of this summer when we drop off Child #2 to college in the Pacific Northwest, I’m hoping we get to visit my college friend Angela and meet her wife and kids. Well, I sort of am.

Angela’s wife is British, and her mother needs help at home following her father’s passing, so the family is working on getting visas and making a move back to the land of King George to be there with her. Because their kids were adopted by Angela’s wife and both the US and UK have yet to fully catch up in procedural law to the realities of marriage equality, it’s taking longer than it should. If all goes according to plan, they’ll have moved by August, and we won’t be able to see them on our trip. So for their sake I’m hoping we won’t see them, but for ours I’m hoping we will.

I have two favorite memories of Angela.

One is a series of memories, technically. She was available and willing to camp across the country with me when I went from California to Rochester, New York, for seminary. My mother wasn’t thrilled at the idea of my traveling alone, and it would be safer, not to mention much more fun, with a friend.

In Salt Lake City, Angela and I ate cold beans from cans the night we learned there are campgrounds where open fires, even charcoal ones, are banned. If I remember correctly, we

compensated by sharing one of the few beers I'd have drunk by then, right there in the heart of Mormon country.

On what was maybe the third night in my new tent, in Estes Park, Colorado, Angela and I watched a spectacular light show of a thunderstorm that woke us up in the middle of the night, and then scrambled to try to soak up the subsequent flood of rainwater inside said tent using every towel and sweatshirt we owned. We spent the next evening washing and drying everything at my cousin's house in Denver.

Driving hundreds of miles through "amber waves of grain" in Kansas, touring the Gateway Arch in St. Louis as we reversed the westward course of our pioneer ancestors, and maneuvering an overloaded Subaru around downtown Chicago to drop Angela at the station for her train ride back... experiences from that trip are baked into my vision of and love for this country, from sea to shining sea.

Before we left, Angela came out to me, one of the few people who ever has done so to me individually. She must have realized my "gaydar," the slang term for being able to figure out who's lesbian or gay, is *really* bad. Her first clue might well have been if she was aware I'd actually and accidentally been engaged to a gay man during college- but that's another story.

Angela may have come out to me because she didn't want me to be surprised or upset to discover her sexual orientation later. Or perhaps just because our friendship was growing, and she had decided to trust me with knowing her better. In any case, I mark that moment as an important one in my own journey. I am sort of scared to ask Angela if whatever I said in response was ok- LGBTQ people often experience so much overt hostility that especially back then in 1990 I imagine Angela would have accepted without giving me feedback a response that would now make me cringe.

Whatever sterling or shabby thing I said out loud, I remember my two-track internal thought process went something like this: One side of my brain: "Oh, gosh. I probably need to make sure Angela doesn't think I date girls. How's that gonna work?" That was the nervous side, the 'this is something new' side.

On the other side: "Michelle, this is a test. You've read and said plenty on the need for the church to welcome rather than exclude. If you can't figure out how to share a tent and 2,000 mile drive to seminary with one of the sweetest, funniest people you know, you're a theological fraud and might as well give it up."

As we approach the July 4th holiday, having marked during this PRIDE month the 52nd anniversary of the Loving v. Virginia ruling and the 50th of Stonewall, we do well to remember that though what is unfamiliar and new can be scary, the church since its beginning has been tasked by the Spirit to proclaim freedom.

As the apostle Paul put it when doing battle with the forces of retrenchment for the future of the Galatian church, "***For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.***"

But how can we know what rules to follow, they asked then just as we in all seriousness may ask now? Where is the center that will hold if so much is changing- too slowly according to some and at breakneck speed for others?

The center has not changed. Paul goes on: ***“...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.”***

As we live in freedom and practice love, we can watch and see what grows. Harmful and self-destructive behaviors, anger, hatred, disputes which are the product of resisting the Spirit, or the Spirit’s fruits: ***“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,”*** things no good law restricts.

My second favorite memory of Angela is of her garden. When we graduated that May, she rented a small bungalow and, filled with the enthusiasm of someone freed from institutional dorm living, planted an over abundance of seeds in her tiny plot. By midsummer when I visited the space was overrun with the happiest vines you can imagine, the plants bursting through the picket fence stakes to take advantage of the light beyond. There were no rows, the tomatoes and green beans and cukes just jostled with each other and coexisted.

It probably wouldn’t go over that well here in New England, the “land of steady habits” where immigrant farmers have been extracting crops from the rocky rills for four centuries, but because the soil in Angela’s garden was fresh and rich, that flurry of life, that riotous jungle of mixed species, was doing better than fine.

That vitality, that opening to allow the Spirit to direct growth, is what propelled the Christian community in the first century to take Good News to the Gentiles, and it is the vitality and openness we must desire today if we hope to bring a timely, relevant, and loving Word to a new generation.

I close this morning with a collection of presidential quotes taken out of context but which together express what I hope is a nonpartisan vision that can be applied to the church, not just our nation.

***Let us ask ourselves, 'What kind of people do we think we are?' And let us answer, 'Free people, worthy of freedom and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well.'***

***The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave.***

***Let us be shy no longer. Let us go to our strength. Let us offer hope. Let us tell the world that a new age is not only possible but probable.***

Not Roosevelt, Kennedy, or Obama. All from the President in office when Angela and I started high school all the way through our junior year in college, Ronald Wilson Reagan.

May we grow in Christ’s Spirit to be worthy sharers of freedom, to be courageous, and to proclaim God’s new age. Amen.