

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
13th Sunday of Year C

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Galatians 5:1, 13-18

In a few days we will be celebrating July 4th, Independence Day. We will be celebrating our freedom from tyrannical rule, from taxation without representation. It is this "freedom from" external constraint that provides us with the "freedom to," the freedom to make those decisions, those choices, which we hope will provide us with some measure of happiness in this life. But there is a third kind of freedom, that of which St. Paul speaks in today's passage from his Letter to the Galatians, that can be spoken of as the "freedom for," the freedom for giving a certain shape or direction to our lives, a shape or pattern to our lives which is directed towards God. And, because this "freedom for" is more fundamental than opting for product A, B or C on a shelf or online at Amazon, it involves what we are making of ourselves by those individual choices; it determines the kind of person we are in the process of becoming by the choices we make.

But first, let's look at this "freedom to," this freedom to choose. The assumption that rules our whole societal-economic system is that the more choices we have available to us, the more freedom we will have, and that will make us better off. As we look around our world today, we see we have an explosion of choices, but what do these opportunities do for us, what do they do to us? And, are we, in fact, better off because of them? When we go into an electronics store to purchase the elements of a stereo sound system, where does one start to sort out the superiority of one woofer and tweeter over another? This explosion of choices is replicated for the woman who walks through the cosmetic counters of Bloomingdales or Sephora. Which is the lotion that really works, if any of them do? Modern day life is full of choices. More often than not this explosion of choices produces paralysis rather than liberation. How do I know I am making the right choice?

Even after one has finally come to a decision about some product, one can end up less satisfied with the choice he or she has made, than if they had fewer options available to them. Let's say that in my trip to the supermarket, I choose one particular brand of salad dressing. I go home and try it and it's OK, but it's not great. It doesn't knock my socks off! There is always that lingering doubt, that if I had chosen another brand, that one would have been so much better. This leads me to regret the decision I did make, and lessens my satisfaction and enjoyment of that purchase I made, even if it was in fact a pretty good choice.

The way we value things depends on what we compare them to. It's the "grass-

is-always-greener” syndrome. When there are lots of alternatives to choose from, it’s easy to consider the alternatives not chosen to be more attractive than the thing I have chosen, with the end result that what I am choosing thereby seems less attractive. The wide range of choice we have available to us make us less satisfied with what we have picked, even if that choice was terrific. There is always the nagging suspicion that I could have done better.

Part of the reason for a dissatisfaction with the choices we have made may be that we have come to expect perfection, and perhaps our expectations are too high, even unrealistic. And this can apply to situations much weightier than selecting a salad dressing; it can refer to career choices, to marriage partners, and so on. So, when we try to explain our disappointment with those choices to ourselves, we begin to think, “I should have waited. I should have done more research. It was my own fault. I blew it.” Then we may become angry with ourselves; we may come to experience a terrible sadness, perhaps even depression. (And, all this is compounded by affluence. The more choices our wealth makes available to us, the greater the possibility of disappointment.) .

But now let’s look at that third kind of freedom, the freedom of which St. Paul speaks, the “freedom for.” St. Paul says “[we] were called for freedom.” “For freedom Christ set us free.” It is the freedom to use wisely and well the good things of this world so that we can enjoy them for what they are, and not as compensations for our own inadequacies. To be able to do that we need a strength, which comes from beyond ourselves, that comes from God’s own Spirit dwelling in our hearts. It is that Spirit which provides us with the capacity for growing into more loving people. It is that Spirit which enables us to put aside fear, anger, resentment, jealousy, rivalry, and all those other things that keep us at odds with each other. It is that Spirit which allows us to flourish as a complete human being, and not merely as just some consumer or market-share.

So, let us be appreciative of the blessings we enjoy in being free from the oppression so many on our planet are forced to endure. Let us be aware of the limitations that the freedom to choose can provide; that there is more to life than some promise of “consumer bliss.” And let us take advantage of the freedom God gives us, the freedom for giving a shape and direction to our lives to become a person capable of loving in the manner Jesus has shown us.