

June 30, 2019 Called for Freedom Homily: Members of this congregation may recall with gratitude and appreciation the fables of Aesop, a marvelous storyteller, who lived six centuries before the birth of Christ. Each one of his tales has a profound message. Take, for instance, his fable of “The Wolf and the Dog”.

One day a wolf, underfed and starving, encounters a well fed and perfectly healthy house dog on the road. The dog takes note of the wolf’s sorry condition, and is moved with pity for him. “Why do you not work steadily as I do and get your food regularly given to you?” asked the dog. In reply, the hungry wolf says, “I would have no objection if I could find a place to work.” The dog wanted to be helpful. “I will arrange for you to come with me to my master and we will share my work”. The wolf was pleased. And so they began their journey to the dog’s master. On the way the wolf noticed that hair was missing from the dog’s neck. He asked for an explanation. “Oh that”, replied the dog. “This is the only place where the collar is put on at night to keep me chained up. After a while, you get used to it”.

At that very moment, the wolf walked away. He no longer wished to accompany the dog on his journey to his master. He simply refused to surrender his freedom!

The moral is: It is better to suffer hunger and remain a free creature and not be in bondage to a master as a well fed slave.

In religious terms, freedom is a divine gift and, without question, the hallmark of Christian existence. Clearly, freedom was an important issue for St. Paul. The word occurs with striking frequency in his magisterial letter to the Galatians “For freedom, Christ has set us free” (Gal.5:1), declares the great apostle at the beginning of his fifth chapter. No fewer than forty-seven times is freedom mentioned.

What Paul has in mind is the Law, which stipulates that a convert undergo the rite of circumcision, a visible sign of the Jewish covenant with God. In addition, they had to faithfully observe the dietary restrictions imposed by the Law, such as abstaining from all pork products. Paul insists that Christians are not bound by the law. Ultimately, freedom draws its meaning from love. Our true freedom is realized only when we place ourselves in the service of others. In today’s reading Paul exhorts Christians to “serve one another through love”. (Gal.5:13)

Clearly, if there ever was one who was perfectly free, it was Jesus Himself. Recall his words, “The Son of Man has come, not to be served but to serve and to give his life for the many”. (Mk.10:45) He also emphatically stated that the two great commandments of the Torah are the love of God and the love of neighbor. St. Paul echoes Our Lord’s words in his letter. “For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. (Gal.5:14)

Having been born in 1954, and having recently turned 65, I have heard scores of songs over the years in which the word “free” or “freedom”, is included in the song’s title More than likely, you remember the songs “I’m Free” (The Who), “Philadelphia Freedom” (Elton John), “Free Bird” (Lynyrd Skynyrd), “I feel Free” (Cream), “I shall be Free” (Bob Dylan), and so many others. Freedom is one of the most popular themes in contemporary music. Alas, in many of the songs freedom for the song writers mean, “freedom from the commandments”, “freedom from responsibility”, “freedom from authority”, and

“freedom from the church” The emphasis seems to be on doing as one pleases. Rarely do we hear the words, “duty”, “accountability”, “responsibility” and “obedience”. For the writers of popular songs the freedom we enjoy must never be impeded or constrained. Sadly, such are the pitfalls of living in a hyper-individualist culture.

Paul cautions the Galatians that they must not use their freedom, a divine gift, “as an opportunity for the flesh”. (Gal.5:13) What he means here is that we must not follow the selfish tendencies of our fallen human nature. It is a seductive trap. If we were to do so, we would fall into slavery yet again. Such are the devastating consequences of abusing the freedom won for us by Christ. If we act in our own selfish interests, we are slaves to our own appetites, and truly show unmistakable signs of addiction. And addictions can be deadly if not addressed in short time.

On the other hand, if we live by the Spirit, we will be free. St. Paul is adamant on this very point. Our freedom, a gift, will be anchored in Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And the chains that once bound us will be shattered, hopefully for good. Our promise must be to never again submit to the yoke of slavery. After all, we have been “called for freedom”. (Gal.5:1) And the freedom Paul speaks of is one of the Christian’s most beautiful blessings.

Amen!