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Galatians 5:1, 13-14

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Swinging Free

No American holiday is as unabashedly celebratory as Independence Day. The holidays that are founded in religious observance, no matter how joyous, still have a depth and a sobriety to them. Christmas and Easter are both times for exaltation, but exaltation with reserve. Reserve, because in order for us to understand the great proclamations of salvation to which they bear witness we must first acknowledge our need to be saved. Advent precedes Christmas and is a time of preparation, reflection and waiting. Lent precedes Easter and I needn't tell you how long those forty days and nights can be. By the time we've arrived at the Feast days, we are ready to party.

The same applies to many of our secular holidays as well. Memorial Day and Labor Day call to mind those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf, people who have fought and labored for the furtherance of some ideal, some hope, this country. And the exuberance of these days is always tempered by the cold silence of the grave. Thanksgiving, as we celebrate it, is pretty purely thankful but even this holiday has a bit of a high-minded morality to it. Those of you who have read Nathaniel Philbrick's *Mayflower* know that our interpretation of the Pilgrims' first harvest feast is also substantially inaccurate and swathed in folklore and myth. On Thanksgiving we are indeed very grateful, not just for turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie, not just for food, but for the blessings of life and family and home, no matter how frail they may be. And though we are hesitant to mention it, the alternative to our abundance always looms large before us. Coming as it does in the fall of the year, it is seasoned by the russet hues of nature, by browns and umber and the gray rolling skies of winter's advance.

The Fourth of July, on the other hand, is a flash of primary color: red, white and blue, no holds barred, no tempered joy. It is parades and bugles, strawberries and cream, fireworks and jollity. After all, on Independence Day we proclaim our freedom from the tyrannical British, our victory over oppression and inequality, our stand for liberty and

justice for all. There is nothing in the least depressing or somber about this celebration. It would take a seasoned cynic to dampen this day, to introduce a note of reservation, to encourage reflection when what we want to do is rejoice. Sometimes when I remind people that Advent is a season of quiet waiting and not a time to sing Christmas carols, people are less than delighted and tell me so. My intention this morning is not to rain on your coming Independence Day picnic, but to look a bit at what it means to be free, what this country got when it broke the yoke of British domination, and what Paul means when he speaks of being free in Christ.

The Fourth of July has an underlying giddiness to it that suggests that we can do what we want: we don't go to work, the cookouts start early, it is a day of freedom. The dictionary identifies freedom with autonomy, independence, sovereignty, a kind of "do as I please" mentality. This is not at all what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Galatians saying, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery." The yoke of slavery to which Paul referred was the Hebrew Law, the strict Levitical Holiness Code that governed every aspect of Jewish life. Paul was not suggesting that the people ignore the law completely but that they pledge their allegiance first and foremost to Christ and to God who sent him. Freedom thus had both liberation and obligation, freedom from the oppressive strictures of Hebraic law but also a new obligation to Christ and to one another. "For the whole law," he said, "is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This kind of freedom is very demanding and much less clear than a delineated set of rules. How do we all live in relationship with one another? What does it mean to be free in Christ?

We could, of course, look at this from many perspectives, but this morning I'd like to use the lens of music, specifically jazz, to try to understand what this new kind of freedom means. First, I must issue a disclaimer. I know next to nothing about jazz, and realize it is presumptuous of me to talk about it. But I've done some reading and some listening lately that lead me to believe that jazz is a perfect example of the kind of freedom Paul was talking about and the kind of freedom that this country won more than two hundred years ago.

Jazz is America's music, born of the African American experience, nurtured and shaped by slavery, two world wars, depression and desire. It speaks of a people yearning to be free, of a people finding their way, losing their way, knowing that if all else fails they have each other. Ken Burns has said, "(Jazz) is also about sex, the way men and women talk to each other, it's the mating call of America. It's about drugs and the terrible, terrible cost of addiction, and it's about extraordinary human beings—in some ways, as important as the founding fathers who have continued to show that the genius of America is the genius of improvisation." (Interview on CNN, January 8, 2001)

Jazz can tell us a lot about freedom. "Put it this way," Duke Ellington once said, "Jazz is a good barometer of freedom...In its beginnings, the United States of America spawned certain ideals of freedom and independence through which, eventually, jazz was evolved, and the music is so free that many people say it is the only unhampered, unhindered expression of complete freedom yet produced in this country." (Burns, Ken. *Jazz*. vii.) My suspicion, though, is that even if jazz is about freedom, it is more about relationships.

What happens among musicians is always dictated by different things, not the least of which is the tune, the piece, the notes of the song. In classical music the sheet music is the Levitical Law, black notes on the white page. When an orchestra plays a concerto or symphony, all the musicians know pretty much what the others should be doing. Aside from an occasional cadenza and allowances for dynamics and interpretation, everyone is on the same page. There is safety in this approach and a high risk of trouble if a particular section strays too far. We've all seen that happen and it can be disastrous. Derailing from the track of the score is, unfortunately, contagious and what can happen is that when the strings slip, the woodwinds wander, the brass crash, the timps fall and you have before you what is affectionately called in the trade, "a train wreck." It is not a pretty sight or sound.

Jazz musicians bring to any piece a host of governing influences. They start with a tune, like everyone else, but they bring prevailing allowances like the idea that an infinite number of melodies can fit the chord progressions of any song. Improvisation

follows along agreed-upon chord progressions. I suspect that before the musicians start to play, they had better know each other pretty well; they better trust that one player isn't going to go off half cocked and solo out of control. They have to be acutely attuned to one another. The great trumpeter Wynton Marsalis speaks eloquently of this. Given that jazz is uniquely American, he was asked recently what jazz is telling us now about our country.

“Right now,” he says, “it’s telling us that we need to learn how to listen. We don’t listen, you know. It’s like when I hear these young musicians play, the thing they all have in common is they don’t listen to each other. First, they play too loud. When you’re playing that loud, you just can’t play with anybody else. And then it’s telling us we need to listen and make an honest attempt to understand what somebody else is playing. If you’re playing the trumpet and you don’t understand what the bass is playing, you might be lost. If you don’t know the chords the piano is playing, it’s very hard to play with the piano. So part of your responsibility is to learn. You have to go and get the drummer and say, ‘What is this rhythm?’ ‘It’s five rhythm.’ ‘Okay, can you show me how to play that? How should I react to that?’ You can’t say, ‘Well, I’m African American and you’re Asian American and you’re Caucasian and you’re Irish American and I want ten percent of this and you can have the other ninety percent,’ because the music doesn’t work that way. *Everybody* has to make the music. I can’t say, ‘Well, I’m a trumpet player, I don’t have to know what the piano is playing. All I want is my space to solo.’ ‘I’m the drummer so I play louder than all of you so do the best you can.’ Or, ‘I’m the composer and I know more than all of you...play my music the way I want you to.’

“If you compose music, you have to write music the musicians can play,” Marsalis goes on. “If you are the trumpet player, you have to figure out how to play in balance with the saxophone. If you’re the drummer, you have to figure out how to groove and swing and make everything feel right for everybody, how to push them along when they need help, how to back away when they don’t... So everybody has their little

thing they have to do, but all the roles are interchangeable. It's a matter of the integrity and the intelligence of the group." (ibid.121)

Ultimately, it's a matter of compassion and love and forgiveness. It might be fair to say that when playing jazz, you'd best love your neighbor as yourself. There is a lot of freedom in jazz, ample opportunity to make a fool of yourself, to grandstand some moment and let your pride carry you away, or alternately, to shrink from the nudge of the drummer and not give forth the tune that lies within you.

We are all given that same freedom in Christ, that freedom that is, ironically, not free at all. At least not in the sense we might think. We are free to love and care for one another and express our gifts, using our judgment, our heads and our hearts and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit—that great drummer—to guide and balance us. No written law can tell us how to do this. We must listen with the ears of our hearts, listen to the great promise that tells us that through Christ all things are possible. Jazz, so mighty and humble a witness to human trial and joy, says the same thing in its own way. Again, Wynton Marsalis, a man of profound Christian faith, once said that he believed that Louis Armstrong was chosen by God to “bring the feeling and message and the identity of jazz to everybody...Louis Armstrong's overwhelming message is one of love. When you hear his music, it's of joy...He was just not going to be defeated by the forces of life. And these forces visit all of us...My great-grandmother used to say that 'life has a board for every behind' and it's a board just fit to yours...And when it's your turn...that paddle is going to be put on your booty and it's going to hurt as bad as it can hurt. And Louis Armstrong is there to tell you after you get that paddling, 'It's all right, son.'" (ibid.vii)

That is the assurance that on our best and worst days we know deep in our hearts, and we know that it comes from God. We hear it in scripture and in music, we see it in the glory of nature, in children snuggling on our laps, the nuzzle of newborns, the smile on our dog's face when we come home, the way, when we can summon the courage to speak, a friend listens to the truth we have to tell.

For we hold these truths to be self evident, that every player in the band is created equal, that every person, regardless of advantage, race, ability, gender, sexual orientation

or religion, is endowed by our Creator with the right to play the tune, to improvise, not just alone, but together with love and compassion.

Amen.