

Dear Members and Friends of St. John,

Most of us have seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Freedom – it isn't free." Of course, the person that is displaying this is probably referring to the cost of *political freedom*. Look at this nation's War of Independence, the Civil War, or World War II and you can see that political freedom is definitely not free. The cost is high - lives are lost, families are devastated - people suffer.

But what about *spiritual freedom*? What does Scripture say? We read from St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians, "*Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.*"²⁹ *But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.*"³⁰ *But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman."*³¹ *So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.*¹ *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...*¹³ *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.* (Gal. 4:28-31, 5:1, 13). We have been released from our slavery to sin. We were yoked to sin, but at our Baptism, we were set free. **Christ died to set us free, so that we could be *spiritually free*.** But St. Paul adds a warning about how we use that freedom: "*Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.*"

When I think of free gifts, I'm reminded of the earliest housing projects in the United States – part of the 'war on poverty' that President Lyndon Johnson put in place. St. Louis, Missouri was the scene of a social experiment in this 'new war.' The plan was to provide low cost housing to the poor by building high rise tenements. The cost of housing was practically nothing to those who qualified, and the results of the experiment were startling to many. The high rise buildings quickly fell into decay. Windows were smashed out, garbage littered the complexes. Plumbing and electrical lines and fixtures were stolen. What sociologists failed to understand is that, where there is no personal sacrifice of time or money, there is no personal ownership. And without personal ownership, there's no commitment to or respect for property. The people that should have been thrilled to receive a decent place to live, instead rejected the free gift and ended up destroying it.

The cost of spiritual freedom is relatively small for us, but in many parts of the world, being a Christian means persecution and even prison. There are places in the world where people literally put themselves and their families at risk in order to attend worship. But even in the face of danger, they will not turn from their faith. The Gospel of Jesus Christ means everything to them. You see, Jesus went to Jerusalem for the last time, fully aware of what would happen. He knew He would have to die for you and me, so that we could be free from sin, and the consequences of dying in our sin.

But what does this spiritual freedom mean for God's people? To many, I'm afraid, it means that 'church is no big deal.' We can see this, I believe, in people that attend sporadically or occasionally. Is it possible that, just like the people that didn't have to sacrifice much for

housing, we end up taking church for granted? Has it been such an easy *spiritual life* that whether or not we attend worship on the weekend is of little importance to us? St. Paul reminds us that **we are indeed free, but that we must guard that freedom**. Sin has a way of creeping back into our lives, and Satan will work overtime to make you think that your salvation is so secure that you don't need God anymore. May God prevent this from happening at St. John.

Our spiritual life in Christ must be nourished and fed, just like our physical bodies must receive good food. The Word spoken and preached, along with the Sacrament of the Altar, provide our souls with what we need, spiritually. It's time for a gut check. If you haven't been taking your *spiritual life* seriously lately, go to your Lord in prayer, and ask Him to help you. Our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He desires that you seek to grow closer to Him. He promises that He will provide you will all you need. From Matthew chapter 7 we read, "*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*" Your spiritual life is a free gift, but it must be guarded, and fed, or it will die. May we never lose sight of this important truth.

Pastor Travis