

Sermon July 5, 2026

Lisa Carroll

My dear friends, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am honored to be here speaking to you today on the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, which happens to coincide with our nation's 250th anniversary yesterday. When I signed up to preach today, I admit I didn't give the date a lot of thought. But, since I take the responsibility of speaking from this pulpit very seriously, that changed in the last few weeks. I wrote no less than 5 versions of this sermon, trying to be prepared just in case events unfolded surrounding the Independence Day holiday. The last version, the one that you're hearing now, was written late last night.

Because, you see, while the date on the calendar shouldn't be a big deal, in our current culture, it **is**. I confess that I've been really concerned lately. I worry when I see the flag and the cross being held up as equals. I worry that Christian identity and national identity get tangled up for some people. Let me say clearly that there is nothing wrong with feeling patriotic or celebrating our shared history as Americans. As long as there is perspective and balance, all is well. Conflicts arise only if we mix up our devotion to God with our devotion to our country or somehow wrap them together. Or, if we use our identity as followers of Christ to somehow justify cruel words and harmful actions toward others.

With all of this in mind I chose to step away from the lectionary today and turn instead to Paul's letter to the Galatians for the second scripture reading. The beautiful Psalm that Kay read earlier **is** part of the scheduled lectionary and serves well to show us God's heart and draw us closer to it. By turning to Galatians it is my intent today to shine light on what freedom means to us as followers of Christ: nothing to do with flags or fireworks, but everything to do with Jesus' commandment to love one another. It is not my intent to inflame or provoke but instead to give food for thought and let the Holy Spirit do the heavy lifting. With that in mind, let's talk about freedom.

If we're going to talk about freedom, we should start with a definition. Freedom doesn't mean getting to do whatever we want, it means having choices. *Freedom means having choices*. Options; reasonable, viable alternatives from which to decide on the best course of action for yourself and your family. Freedom means having agency and control over your own life, from big life decisions down to what to wear every day.

"Freedom isn't free." This truth is spoken whenever we remember with gratitude the sacrifices made on our behalf by those who serve. Dave and I visited Omaha Beach in

France last November and the reminder of the events of D-Day that helped to ensure the Allied victory in Europe during World War 2 will stay with me for the rest of my life. I will always remember with gratitude the lives that were lost on that day or any other day so that, for example, I can get in my car and choose where I want to go. I have the freedom to do so.

Eleanor Roosevelt famously said, "Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility." I believe Spiderman's Uncle Ben said something similar about power, so choose your source. I mentioned a moment ago my gift of freedom that allows me to get in my car and drive wherever I want, and that provides me with an opportunity to dig deeper into my point of what freedom really means.

When I get in my car, I have choices about the ride. I can choose to drive over the speed limit; I have the freedom to do so, but there are consequences for that. Just ask any Wood County deputy (some of whom I have met). I can choose to drive the wrong way on the interstate. Technically speaking I have the freedom to do that also, since I know where my car keys are and how to get to the interstate, although again, there are consequences. Consequences for myself and anyone else who might be on the road. While I might have the freedom to drive in a really unsafe manner, I do not have the right to exercise that freedom at the expense of others who would be gravely harmed by my actions. Freedom of actions and words does not mean freedom from consequences.

Listen to Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Verse 13 tells us that while we are called to freedom we are not to use that freedom as permission for sinful self indulgence but as an opportunity to love our neighbors as ourselves. Paul also makes it clear that while we are free to choose strife, anger, jealousy, envy, and a host of other desires of the flesh, following the Spirit will lead you to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

What a different place the world would be if everyone lived by Paul's words. Can you imagine a world in which love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control guided the choices and actions of everyone from world leaders on down? Where freedom is used as an opportunity to love and support each other rather than knock each other down or keep others in their place? Where impactful decisions are guided by the desire for safety and wholeness and dignity for every person?

Wouldn't the world be a different and wonderful place if we chose unity instead of division and conflict.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Paul tells us that the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself. Sometimes I think I learned just as much from my kids' Sunday School lessons as they did, because as I read these verses I can't help but think of the definition my family learned there for "neighbor." Your neighbor is anyone who isn't you. You are to love everyone who isn't you as much as you love yourself. No exceptions.

Freedom of choice. From the moment you woke up this morning, how many choices did you make? I'll share. I got up this morning at about 6:00, which for me is on the late side. I'm an early birdie, but I do have the freedom to get up whenever I want to. I chose to have yogurt for breakfast, although I could have had peanut butter toast. I chose my clothes from a closet full of options. I chose to ride to church with Dave instead of driving myself in my car. I could go on, but you get the idea.

I'm grateful to have agency and control over my own choices, but we have to acknowledge that not everyone is blessed in the same way. Remember the definition of freedom? It means having real, viable options for yourself and your family. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to use our freedom to support and uplift others whose life circumstances are not for us to judge. "Take it or leave it" and "if you don't like it, you can leave" are **not** viable options to people who are struggling to feed, house, and protect their families.

When we're tempted to point our fingers at those who don't look like us, or act like us, or speak like us, or worship like us, remember again that freedom means **we** have choices. We have the choice to embrace chaos and division or to follow where the Spirit leads and be guided by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. To be guided by the gift of freedom in Christ.

A popular essay by Robert Fulghum spells it out in a slightly different way: All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. I quote:

"All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in Kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned.

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
Wash your hands before you eat.
Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and
dance and play and work every day some.
Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together."

Earlier in the service we sang the hymn "This is My Song." The tune, by Jan Sibelius, dates to 1899 as part of his orchestral masterpiece entitled *Finlandia*, which he composed as a covert protest against Russian censorship.

This is my song, O God of all the nations. A song of peace for lands afar and mine. This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine. But other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine. But other lands have sunlight too, and clover, and skies are everywhere as blue as mine. So hear my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace for their land and for mine.

I challenge you to see the text through a worldwide lens. While the lyrics express love and pride for the author's homeland, nowhere does it mention that homeland by name. Let this beautiful hymn serve as a reminder that the freedom we celebrate this weekend is not a reality for everyone, and it is our call as followers of Christ to do what we can to ensure freedom for all of God's people wherever they live or whatever their circumstances.

On this 250th anniversary of our country, enjoy the fireworks and parades. But along with the hot dogs and apple pie, remember that as we pledge our allegiance, our first allegiance belongs to Christ and Christ alone.

In this and in all things, hold hands and stick together. People of blessing and promise, you have been given freedom in Jesus Christ. Use your freedom to make choices that make the world a better place. Thanks be to God.

Benediction:

As we prepare to leave this place, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. We have been blessed with freedom; now go out and use that freedom to choose peace and love for your neighbors as Jesus commanded. Amen.