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## *The Land of the Brave and the Home of the Free*

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**A sermon by CanonCarolynne Williams**  
**Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Galatians 6:1-16**  
**Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**

I was one of six or seven aspirants in the Diocese of Atlanta during the late 1990s. Being an aspirant meant that you were approved and sponsored by your home parish to pursue the very detailed and monitored journey of going "through the process" leading toward ordination to become a deacon and eventually a priest. The first beginning was being approval by a discernment committee and approval of the parish vestry. My home parish was the Episcopal parish of St. Timothy's in Decatur. Becoming an aspirant was the second beginning.

A part of this journey for me was to live in a shelter, of which I did along with the other aspirants for a very, very brief period of time. The rules of the shelter were applied as they were at the time for any shelter in the city of Atlanta. We as aspirants were to abide by the rules of the shelter. It was not a place to relax or sleep. It was a bed for the night, if you were lucky enough to get one and by 8:00 o'clock in the morning, we were back on the streets. My partner was Curtis who was a homeless person.

Curtis had been screened by the sponsors of this part of the process as had the other partners.

We were to take nothing with us. No purse, no cash. I was not to take a credit card. So, I slipped a tube of lipstick into my jean pocket to give me some comfort. Curtis and I walked and walked around this city. The walking was not to lose weight or to become fit. The walking was to keep moving because we did not want to be arrested for loitering. We had no address. We were sent out like lambs into the midst of wolves. The message that we carried was not to evangelize, but to live into the freedom that we were experiencing on a daily basis. The freedom to understand the mission of being homeless on the streets of Atlanta and the freedom to understand the responsibility that we each carried. The responsibility to not break the law, to share with others, to walk with our faith and to claim God's grace and mercy in our lives.

I learned how to jump turnstiles at the Marta station, because we had no cash, yet we wanted to ride when we could, to give our feet a rest. We rested in the park in West End. We went to the fire station to get water, asking if we could turn on the spigot and drink from it. And when we were hungry, we had to go into fast food places. We'd ask for a cup behind the counter. We relished drinking fresh, clean, free water. We were accepted, yet rejected. We were bearing one another's burdens, yet we were rejected in unspoken ways without anyone saying a word.

Paul tells the people of Galatia to not grow weary in doing what is right. He tells them to accept the hospitality that is given to them by strangers. There is a certain freedom in that and he reminds them that they were there to support one another on their journey. He also reminds them that contacts with people in their towns and homes was better than brief contacts on the road. The contacts, the approaches on the road to complete strangers would be viewed by the stranger as a possible attack, or, them approaching the stranger on the road would feel threatening to the stranger and would not be sufficient nor garner any good.

GOOD is usually the intention of Christian people. Hospitality being extended to the stranger is a part of who we are as Christians. And rightfully so.

Paul could say these things to the Galatians because he had come from a different place within himself as well. He did not regard his turning to Christ as "Judaism as being abandoned, but as Judaism completed." (Romans 3:21-22) In speaking to the people of Galatia, he seems to have moved from a place of limitation to a place of growing in his faith. His beliefs were becoming more mature. He was teaching others to take the risk and go beyond their circle to see with a discerning spirit, the connection with others. A connection that permits one to travel across the many lines of divisions that set us apart.

The many lines of division have shifted and the separation of church and state has its place in a free society. "Our church Fathers believed what the early church had believed. The Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. Over the course of time, beliefs were worked out in greater detail." (*The Church of Our Fathers*, Roland H. Bainton, pg. 105) Faith demonstrated by our church fathers, and their decisions moved the church forward, even if ever so slowly, for approximately four hundred years. The separation of church and state has its place. Yet within the hallowed halls of the corridors of this country, where freedom is sought after continually and church and state have differences of opinion, in spite of our forefathers intentions we still say "let freedom ring." Freedom takes work within community. Freedom is costly, in ways that we all know too well. Freedom always calls for community to be in action in the forefront, behind the scenes, around the table, in the boardroom, across lines of demarcation, on more levels that sometimes split and multiply like a cell. This happens in many communities. Individually or corporately one way or another.

Freedom is impressive.

Those who were sent out two by two had a sense of freedom within themselves and they were prophetic in sharing this message with many communities of their time. Growing in our faith comes from interacting with the stranger who sometimes becomes a friend. Relationship happens when forgiveness is present, when God's grace is accepted as a part of the deal. Freedom is not taken for granted when we Christians recall our long history in time. Our history of thankfulness, our history of repentance, our history of allegiance especially when we truly believe in the dignity of every human being. When that happens, we confess, as a nation that we are still working toward loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Walking with Curtis, my homeless friend, taught me to think about the homeless. While we struggled to exist over the course of a day or two, we talked about God and God's presence in our lives and being in this country. Curtis had a faith that convinced him that he would not always be homeless in this land of the free and the home of the brave.

When we parted from one another and I thanked him for taking care of me, because I did not know how to navigate the hinterlands and the byways and the streets. I walked away with more of the presence of God around me than I ever dreamed and it was my hope that Curtis did not feel that he had wasted his time with me, as a neighbor, as a Christian, as a fellow American.

Hopefully, the work that we shared, and the humanness that permeated our experience, influenced us and moved us to a place like Paul. Where we were transformed and told others that God's presence in any situation gives us freedom to be. Just to be, and do the work that we are inclined to do in God's name. After all, we are a part of the Body of Christ. This land is a place that is unlike any other on this earth when it comes to freedom. This land is a place that continues to extend itself for the betterment of all people, even in the midst of strife and turmoil. The great news is that we are always moving forward like Paul, the seventy sent out, to spread the good news and all of this is to glorify the one who gave us, as Christians, a promise. Come and live in the freedom of my presence. It will bring you peace unlike any other. Hopefully, we will continue to take God at God's word.

To God be the Glory. Amen.

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