

Lectionary 13C 2019, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, June 30, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

This past week our youth served the community of Taylorsville, North Carolina for our summer mission trip. Taylorsville is a small town of about 3,000 people nestled in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains in the western part of the state. We joined with four other churches who brought their youth from a suburb of Pittsburg, a bedroom community outside Washington, DC, a town in Michigan and a community outside Charlotte, NC. All together we were about 60 youth and 10 adult chaperones along with the 4 leaders of Youthworks.

Our youth were given the opportunity to go out in the community and serve these needs. Along the way they discovered the real people who live in Taylorsville. Kids like Kouri and Kavi, two brothers of enormous energy and their cousin Gracelynn. They played kickball in the hot sun and made crafts in the shade of the pavilion in the community park. We met Miss Judy and her husband James, an elderly couple who over 43 years built by hand a water park in a mountain stream bed. It was a quiet, family-run business until a few weeks ago when devastating floods washed down the mountain and all but destroyed their life's work. We were sent there to help clean up the sand and gravel and rocks that filled the pools they had made by hand. Miss Judy thought everything was lost but the youth worked hard and hope began to return that they might still be able to open their little park

A mission trip like the one we took is a concentrated experience of what Paul tells the Galatian church in our second reading today, "Through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single verse, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" We serve the community which we are privileged to visit which is important in of itself. There is great need there as there is everywhere. But we also learn to love the neighbor who might be another youth from our own group or a youth from one of the other youth groups. We grow to depend on each other for all the daily tasks of living together; fixing meals and cleaning bathrooms, carrying water and lunch coolers, mixing paint and holding ladders.

Your neighbor can be a community member in a far off place like Taylorsville or as close as the family member in your own home. A neighbor can be the one radically different than yourself or like you in almost every way. A neighbor can be a friend or a complete stranger. But the neighbor is always at the heart of love. That's why Paul can say love of neighbor constitutes the heart of God's law.

Even as Paul speaks of love he also speaks of freedom. For Paul the two always go hand in hand; love and freedom.

This week we celebrate the holiday devoted to our national freedom, the Fourth of July. Fireworks, bands, cannons, picnics and festivities will mark the anniversary of our nation's independence. We celebrate freedom from foreign domination. We celebrate our freedom from tyranny and oppression.

But for Paul freedom is never just freedom from some form of oppression and slavery. Freedom is a gift that is lived for something. And that something is love for the well being and sake of others. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters," Paul tells the Galatians, "only do not use your freedom as opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another."

Now it seems strange to say that freedom leads to slavery, but that's exactly what Paul is saying. Christian freedom always leads us towards our neighbor. Christian freedom sends us into the world as servants of God and one another.

Freedom takes us to the doorstep of our neighbor. That's because we are followers of Jesus, and not someone else. Jesus lived his entire life for the sake of his neighbor. He is the one who gave himself away in such a perfect love that he held each person he met in high regard. He stooped to wash their feet. He stopped to heal them along the way. He preached good news of God's coming kingdom, he gathered sinners and saints, the righteous and unrighteous into his company of friends. And in the end, because the world would not contain such love they put him to death. It seems like a paradox of faith that such radical and self-giving love should end up that way, but this often the way of the world.

It all might have ended there, with the death of one who loved so completely. But thanks be to God Jesus rose from the grave. Love could not be kept in the grave. Jesus' life of living for his neighbor is now and ever shall be the way of life for all believers.

The theme of this year's mission trip was called "Storyline." We each have our own story. The events of our lives, the twists and turns we take. And God has a story as well. Creation and rescue from slavery, birth to a human mother and a life of love and service, death and resurrection. God's story meshes with our story as God names us and claims us and one of his own. We began each day with devotions as we considered the ways our individual stories are being written into God's story of love and acceptance and grace. We ended our busy work days with worship in the evening reflecting on how we saw God at work in our lives and in the community we came to serve.

On the last night of our mission trip we held our final worship service. On a Youthworks mission trip this always involves foot washing. We follow the example of Jesus who washed his disciples' feet. It was a powerful moment for many of our youth. It certainly was for me. Washing another's feet is a potent sign of service and love for one's neighbor. It embodied all we experienced that week. Service, love, a willingness to step outside your comfort zone and meet the needs

of others. And in doing so we begin to discover how God enfolds our own individual stories into his own great big story of love and grace. Amen.