Peter and Paul, Apostles – June 29, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Galatians 5:1, 13-25 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
The church has a long and complicated history with its saints. What began as a recognition of God's extraordinary grace and mercy shown to ordinary, fallible humans, later morphed into a kind of hero-worship of supposedly extraordinary people who did amazing things by their strength of character, conviction, and superhuman faith. And that did the rest of the church a grave disservice, presenting us with examples of the Christian life that we could not possibly live up to. Martin Luther noticed this disastrous change in emphasis and sought to correct it. What makes Christian saints true models of faith, he insisted, was not the extraordinary things they did for God, but the extraordinary thing God did for them, in loving them in spite of their failures and in forgiving their unfaithfulness, which sometimes took the form of opposition to God and God's mission of mercy and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. If Peter and Paul have anything in common, it's the magnitude of the transformations that Jesus worked in them.

I think it's just a little bit ironic that Peter and Paul ended up with a combined festival. It happened because they both ended up in Rome, and according to tradition, were martyred there at the same time under the emperor Nero. By the middle of the third century, the church was commemorating both of them on June 29. But it's ironic, or maybe poignant – or maybe both – that they share this festival. Ironic because these two had a sharp and public disagreement in the early days of the church. Paul tells us his side of the story in his letter to the Galatians, a few chapters back from our second reading today. Peter, he says, was in the wrong. He was hypocritical, playing politics, and jeopardizing the mission of the gospel. And Paul says he called him out to his face. Not exactly a warm and fuzzy precedent for a shared feast day. The poignant part of this is that in spite of their conflict, in spite of their own troubled pasts in relationship to Jesus, and by the grace of God alone, they became the people we honor today: Saints of the church. Pillars of the faith. Apostles of the one Lord. Both of them set free from the powers of sin, death, and evil. But let's be clear that that was God's work, and not theirs.

Paul was not only critical of Peter, though. He was also critical of himself, of who he had been before Jesus met him on the Damascus Road, as he recounted in our first reading. Both Peter and Paul had to learn from first-hand, difficult experience about the freeing work of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that Paul writes about in our second reading.[1] I want to pull out three things from this reading that were not only key to Peter's and Paul's transformation, but to ours as well in these contentious times.

First, Christ sets us free not for ourselves but for each other. The freedom that Paul writes about is not generic or nebulous. It's not the kind of vague independence we often hear about in our civic life—freedom that amounts to the right to do whatever we please. Christ's freedom is freedom *from* something very specific. It's freedom from the need to justify ourselves, from the kind of legalism that turns the life of faith into a checklist of behaviors that earn God's favor when we get everything right. That kind of legalism is the yoke of slavery Paul warns against. What makes it especially dangerous is that it can look like righteousness. But it ends up closing our hearts to others. We stop seeing neighbors to love and start looking for boxes to check, and maybe loopholes to excuse us from the burden of caring. We become servants of the rules

[1] That was a process that took a while for both of them. Peter's process is laid out for us in Acts 10-15. Paul's timeline is given in Galatians 1-2.

instead of servants of one another. But Christ means to us free from that. Not so that we can run wild, but so that love—not fear or obligation—becomes the shape of our life together.

And that leads us to the second thing to see in this text. Freedom isn't for serving ourselves. It's for the sake of others and our common life together. "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence," Paul writes, "but through love become slaves to one another." (Gal. 5:13) Here's a paradox. Christ sets us free, Paul tells us, and then he immediately tells us to become slaves. Not to the law, and not, of course, to sin, but to each other. To love. Freedom in Christ is not for doing whatever we want. It's for doing what love needs doing.

Peter learned this the hard way. When Jesus was arrested, he used his freedom to save himself—denying Jesus three times. But by the Sea of Galilee here in our Gospel reading, he is given a better kind of freedom—the freedom of forgiveness. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks. "Feed my sheep." Three times. It's implicit forgiveness, yes, but I think it would not be any clearer if Jesus had come out and said, "I forgive you, Peter!" And such a blunt instrument, I think, would spoil the whole scene. But that's maybe a matter of taste or style. The point is, forgiveness happened, and it would change Peter's life forever. Paul, too, of course, had to learn what true freedom in Christ means. His conversion wasn't just from one religious system to another. It was from domination to service, from pride to humility, from smug self-righteousness to profound gratitude. Just as with Peter, forgiveness happened to Paul on that Damascus Road – also implicitly! – and Paul's life was changed forever.

The third thing to notice in this text is that Spirit bears fruit that we cannot produce on our own. Paul reminds us that the Christian life isn't something we generate or perform, it's something we live and grow into. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—these are not things we squeeze out by trying really hard. Nor are they rewards for spiritual progress or proof of moral resolve. They are what the Spirit is cultivating in us by the promise of the gospel, the promise of life that is grasped by the faith the Spirit creates in us. We've got cucumber plants growing in our garden at home right now, and they're crawling up a trellis we set up for them. I don't know if you've ever seen time-lapsed videos of climbing plants. They kind of wave their tendrils around, feeling for something to grab ahold of. And when they touch something, they grab on to it. So, every so often we go out and direct a stray shoot back toward the trellis. That's kind of how I imagine the Spirit cultivating faith in us that bears fruit.

Peter and Paul didn't become saints by getting it together, or by choosing the right spiritual program. They became saints because of what God in Jesus Christ did for them: dying for them, calling them, forgiving them – and pouring out the Spirit on them to bear fruit in their lives. They became saints by being drawn into the paradoxical freedom of serving their neighbor in love through their common mission of proclaiming the freeing news of the gospel. It wasn't their effort or cleverness or purity that made the difference—it was trust in the promise of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness, a gift and fruit of the Spirit that transformed their hearts and their lives, all things that mere observance of the law could never do.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God's project of making saints of Peter and Paul is also God's project for us: claiming us in Holy Baptism, calling us, forgiving us, pouring the Spirit on us, and bearing the fruit of love in our lives. May we grasp that life-giving promise by the Spirit's gift of faith. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.