

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Free at Last!”**

Galatians 3:23 – 29

Graduation Sunday

June 19, 2016

I'm sure I'm not the only one here this morning who remembers Alice Cooper, right? You know, Alice Cooper? Real name Vincent Furnier? Long-haired singer with makeup and boa constrictors? Alice Cooper was one of the greatest rockers there was, during the 1970's... known for being outrageous and flamboyant on stage, and, surprisingly, carrying a two handicap on the golf course. And he's probably best remembered for his 1972 hit, "School's Out," in which he sang the praises of the end of the academic year, and the joys of summer vacation. That song still rocks... and you'll still hear it from time to time on the Long Island classic rock radio station.

When I graduated from high school in 1975, "School's Out" was surely one of the two or three most played songs at grad parties throughout Southern California. And I'm sure that my Dad yelled at me, more than once, to turn it down, as I blasted it on my bedroom stereo. And I'm equally sure that that probably just made me turn it up even louder!

Anyway, I was thinking about "School's Out" as I worked on the sermon for this morning... on this Graduation Sunday. Because, all of us know the sense of release, that feeling of liberation, that joyous experience of *freedom* that washes over you when classes are done, and the school year is over. School's out, and it's great! It's marvelous! It's wonderful! And it's no more wonderful than it is today, for Hannah and Mackenzie, when the whole high school enterprise has successfully been completed... and you've got a wide-open future out in front of you!

You ladies will be heading off to college... and from there, to a whole new universe of opportunities, and experiences, and possibilities. For both of you, and for our other graduates, you are now free to test the waters of what will become the rest of your life... and the sky is truly the limit for what you might do, and who you might become, in the months and years ahead. And that is... *awesome!* So, on behalf of all of us who've graduated already, from some school or other, we congratulate you! We celebrate with you! And we surround you with our love, and our prayers, and the steadfast assurance that you will *always* have a home here at First Presbyterian... because we'll always be your church family! You hear me talkin' to you? Good!

Now, I said that Hannah, and Mackenzie, and everyone else that's graduating from high school this spring, are now able to look forward to all kinds of wonderful and amazing freedom. This is a unique and special time in a person's life when we really are released from a variety of taskmasters, to which we've really started to feel captive after twelve long years of school.

When I graduated from high school, I was like, "*School's out, and I'm free at last, baby! Free... at... last!*" And, that was true... to a certain extent. I mean, I really was free, at least temporarily, from homework assignments, and math tests, and horrifying report cards, and being nailed with detention by Mr. Martinez for cutting Spanish class. And I reveled in that freedom! I wore it like a badge of honor on my sleeve! I strutted around in the glory of it. For... a couple of

weeks? Maybe a month? However long it took for my Mom to say, “*Hey! Turn off the stereo, put away the drum sticks, get off your fanny, and find a job!*”

And it was then that it finally began to dawn on me that, although I really was free from high school, and all the assorted ups and downs and other stuff that goes along with it; that freedom was *limited*... and it had an *expiration date*. And it *existed*, not just for my personal comfort and self-indulgence... but in order that I might find my way into the *future* that Almighty God intended for me. I really was “free at last;” but only so I could take the first halting, staggering, steps toward becoming the person that the Lord wanted me to be. And, when I say “halting” and “staggering” steps, I’m not kidding... because it took me, what, four? Five? Six years to finally figure out to what and where it was that God was leading me. And, for some people, it takes even longer than that.

Everybody has a different path to follow, to get from the “free at last” that we celebrate on Graduation Sunday... to the conviction of “this is who I really am” that we find when we discover God’s ultimate purpose for our life. But, sooner or later, one way or another... it’s a path we all must take; and if we just have the courage to stay on that path, we will find a life of hope, and meaning, and purpose such as only God can give.

This, at the end of the day, is what Paul the Apostle was getting at, in our lesson this morning from his letter to the Galatians. Of course, the main context the letter was the Galatians being led astray by a group of so-called “Judaizers” who were telling them that they couldn’t be genuine Christians unless, in addition to faith in Christ, they also obeyed much of the Jewish Law. The Judaizers were saying, “You can’t truly be saved unless you follow the Law;” and Paul was saying, “Nonsense! The Law can’t save you, but Jesus can... and will!” That’s the gist of the argument that produced the letter.

So, in our text, Paul is reminding the Galatian Christians that they, too, are “free at last...” not from the challenges and responsibilities of high school, of course, but from the oppressive and burdensome requirements of the Jewish Law. And Paul’s point is that, at one time, the Law had an important and necessary place in the lives of God’s people; but now, because of the grace of God that’s been freely given in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, the Galatians and all Christians everywhere have been set free from the endless “dos” and “don’ts” of the Law.

And here’s the important thing to remember: Paul isn’t saying that the Galatians have been set free from the requirements of the Law, in order to just go out and do their own thing. No, what Paul’s saying is that they have been set free from the Law so that they can fully find the purpose and meaning of their life in the grace of Jesus Christ. It’s as if Paul is saying, in essence, “You have been given great freedom in Jesus Christ! Use it wisely! Don’t turn it into a spiritually sterile system of dos and don’ts... let it be an opportunity for you to become, in every way possible, the men and women that your Heavenly Father wants you to be!”

That was Paul’s great message to the Galatian Christians; and I think that that’s a great message for our Southamptonian and Sag Harborian graduates, too! *You’ve* been given a wonderful dose of freedom from the rigors, and challenges, and pressures of high school; so, enjoy it! But don’t waste it! Don’t take it for granted! Use it to take the next important steps toward becoming the people that your Heavenly Father wants you to be.

Wherever your future takes you in the days and years ahead... to college, to various jobs, to careers, and families, and parenthood, and so on; remember that the ultimate goal behind it all

is to find God's place for *you* in this big, beautiful world that He's created. Remember that the ultimate purpose of your life isn't to make money, or to be famous, or to live in a certain neighborhood, or to get your way more often than not; the purpose of your life is to be a faithful disciple of Jesus in everything you do, everywhere you go. That's what will give your life meaning, and joy, and purpose, and hope... no matter what the future might hold for you! And *that* is true for every last one of us in this sanctuary this morning... and that's what you, and we, are free to seek, and to pursue, and follow every single day of our life! So let's make sure we do that, to the very best of our ability!

You know, this is the first graduating class that I also had in Confirmation class, way back five years ago. You're the first group of young people who've had to endure a Confirmation sermon, and a graduation sermon, both delivered straight to *you*! And, what I want you to know is that, when all is said and done, the message is all the same. When this church service is over, I want you guys to get out of here, and go live the rest of your lives as faithful Christians. Seek the Lord in all you do. Trust that He loves you, that He cares about you, that He's got great plans for you that you might not even be aware of yet. Keep your heart open to Him... and your life will be a thing of beauty, on your good days and your bad days.

Hannah and Mackenzie, school's out, and you're free at last! May God bless you both, as you use that freedom to build lives that make a real difference in this world! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!