July is a month in which we celebrate freedom. Last Sunday was July 4th. July 11th is our first Sunday to resume regular worship services – “freedom from the COVID pandemic” (even though we will still observe some precautions). So, it’s fitting we we study freedom – not political or civic freedom but religious freedom.

In January, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave the annual State of the Union speech. The bulk of the speech was devoted to discussing the World War which had already begun but which had not yet directly involved America. That would change the following December when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Even though the majority of the speech was devoted to military matters, the speech is now known for what is termed Roosevelt’s description of the four essential freedoms. This discussion came near the end of the speech. Roosevelt said:

In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The first is freedom of speech and expression--everywhere in the world.

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way--everywhere in the world.

The third is freedom from want--which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants-everywhere in the world.

The fourth is freedom from fear--which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor--anywhere in the world.

The idea of religious freedom is central to American political thought. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution states, in part, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…”

Most recently, the U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed religious freedom. In *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* (6/17/21) the Supreme Court considered a case where the City of Philadelphia refused to contract its contract with Catholic Charities (CSS) because the agency – run by the Catholic Church – refused to certify same-sex couples as foster parents. The Court ruled that the refusal of Philadelphia to contract with CSS for the provision of foster care services unless CSS agreed to certify same-sex couples as foster parents violated the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. The City’s actions burdened CSS’s religious exercise by forcing it either to curtail its mission (by not providing foster parent services) or to certify same-sex couples as foster parents in violation of its religious beliefs.

Challenges to religious freedom are not new. The early apostles faced persecution as they sought to freely exercise their religion, particularly the right to preach. In Acts 5the apostles are healing people, causing the people to believe in the Christ they were preaching:

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy **18**they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. **19**But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, **20**“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” **21**And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. **22**But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, **23**“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” **24**Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. **25**And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” **26**Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

**27**And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, **28**saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.” **29**But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.

If there were ever a threat to religious freedom – the right to preach Christ – that was it.

Paul introduced an idea of freedom different than the threat of persecution. In Galatians 5:1 Paul wrote that “*for freedom Christ has set us free*; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Here, Paul directly introduces the idea of freedom coming through Christ. Rather than having to worry about freedom being taken away (as had happened with Peter), Paul was speaking about gaining freedom through Christ.

For discussion, think about two questions involving freedom:

1. What threats to religious freedom do you see today? Has anything impacted your freedom of religion? If so, what did you in response?

2. What is the freedom in Christ you feel? How do you express it? Does freedom in Christ have any real impact in your life? If so, how? If not, why?

Enjoy this period when we celebrate our political freedom. But remember always the freedom we have in Christ.

Happy 4th.