

THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF FREEDOM

(07/03/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Galatians 5:1, 13-25
John 8:31, 34-36

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

This morning, our opening hymn was “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” which was written by Samuel F. Smith in 1832. For those of you who were not with us in church this morning, let me remind you of the words of this hymn, words which touch me deeply.

*My country, ‘tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrim’s pride,
From every mountain side
Let freedom ring.*

*My native country, thee,
Land of the noble free,
Thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills,
My heart with rapture thrills
Like that above.*

*Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom’s song;
Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;
Let rocks their silence break,
The sound prolong.*

*Our fathers’ God, to Thee,
Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright
With freedom’s holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God, our King.*

There is so much to say about freedom at this time, at this point in our nation's history, so much that needs to be said. As you might guess, I am deeply troubled by the recent retrograde rulings of the Supreme Court, rulings which I believe abrogate or at least infringe upon the reproductive rights and privacy of women, which restrict states' abilities to limit access to guns, and which have eviscerated the Environmental Protection Agency's power to protect the environment, to protect those of us who are living in this environment from the devastating effects of human-caused climate change.

I am also deeply troubled by a mailing I received this past week from the Southern Poverty Law Center. Their newsletter identified 733 hate groups that operated in and throughout the United States this past year. Every one of these groups, by definition, has the goal of limiting or taking away people's freedom: freedom to vote; freedom to have one's vote count; freedom to love whomever you will; freedom to marry or adopt a child if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; freedom to be your authentic self; freedom to be treated as equal if you are Black, Latino, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, an immigrant or a refugee from Haiti or some other impoverished country; and freedom to hold one's religious views and identity, e.g., Judaism and Islam, without experiencing prejudice and hatred.

I find the darkness that is descending upon our nation and upon the world deeply troubling. In response, however, I return to something that C. G. Jung said. When, a year before his death in 1961, Jung was asked if he believed that the human race would survive, he said, "It depends upon the number of enlightened people." And so, in our own little church, in our own little way, we continue to work toward enlightenment; we continue to bring our little light to bear on our community and then on a darkened nation and world. This is the task to which we are called as Americans and as Christians. Jung simply reminds us that this freedom begins with us, with identifying the ways that we are not free and then with a commitment to become the full human beings that God calls us to be.

The cause of freedom is inextricably interwoven with our national identity. The Pilgrims and the Puritans came to our shores in search of religious freedom. The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement were battles or movements for freedom. The struggle for equal rights for women, for immigrants, for racial and ethnic minorities, for the LGBTQ+ community is an ongoing struggle for freedom. Although our national history has been more than a little checkered in its commitment to ensure freedom for *all* people, the founding ideals of our nation call us to the sacred task of empowering people in our country and around the world to become free and self-determining. It goes without saying, however, that our freedom cannot be asserted in a way that limits the freedom and self-determination, the basic human rights of others. We are not free to take away the constitutional, the human rights of others.

Contrary to the beliefs of some sociologists and social psychologists, I don't believe that freedom is a human invention, a social construct. On the contrary, I believe racism and other forms of prejudice are human inventions, social constructs, which is why I subscribe to critical race theory, the observation that racism and other forms of prejudice in our country are grounded not in biology, but in our attachment to a belief in white heterosexual male supremacy that artificially creates and then systemically subordinates entire classes of people. Freedom, on the other hand, is not a human invention, a social construct. It is a fundamental part of what it means to be truly human. It is a fundamental part of what it means to be a child of God.

Our Judeo-Christian scriptures testify to the importance that God places on human freedom. As articulated in the myth of creation that is recorded in the Book of Genesis, God gave human beings free will. I believe that the gift of free will was God's greatest gift to humanity. God not only created us; God wants to have a relationship with us. To this end, God guided the evolution of consciousness, enabling us as emerging human beings to make conscious choices, not choices that are limited to instinctive drives. There can be no relationship and there can certainly be no love without the precious gifts of consciousness and free will. And where would we be, what would we be without relationship and love?

If God is truly omniscient, God must have known what a mess we human beings would make through our use and abuse of this special gift of free will! Even if God is not omniscient, God must have had a foreboding of where this experiment was going to lead. If God is like a loving parent, as Jesus indicates, then God has cut his children a good deal of slack! God gives us the resources we need to live a loving and compassionate life. God guides us not only through Jesus, through scripture and the church, but also through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. God does not compel us to obey, but rather calls us into relationship. God will not take away our freedom, not even for our own good! Religious freedom, the freedom to fashion our own beliefs and to work out our own relationship with God is apparently very important!

This morning I would like us to think about two kinds of freedom--outer and inner. In each of these realms we need to identify the enemies of freedom, enemies both outside us and within us.

In 1941, as the Second World War raged throughout Europe, the German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote a social psychological treatise entitled *Escape from Freedom*. This is one of the books that I reread during the pandemic as I watched the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian movements in our country and around the world. Fromm, as an existentialist, placed a strong emphasis on both freedom and responsibility. He realized, from his own experience living in Europe, that many people are afraid of freedom, afraid of the responsibility and the attendant insecurity that accompany it. They would rather have others make decisions for them.

Fromm says that if we consciously or unconsciously wish to flee from what the existentialist theologian Soren Kierkegaard described as the “dizzying responsibility of freedom,” someone is only too willing to take it away from us. If this were not true, dictators would have no power. Dictators only have the power we give them in our effort to escape the freedom and the attendant burden of responsibility that is inherently ours. Thomas Jefferson presaged this thought when he observed that “timid men prefer the calm of despotism to the tempestuous sea of liberty.”

There are obvious and sometimes not so obvious outer enemies of freedom. Some of the enemies of freedom dwell in other countries; some are closer to home. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Some of the forces that threaten our freedom are secular, while others, sadly, are religious. If we take Fromm’s warning seriously, we need to identify and take a stand against both our fear of freedom and our blind allegiance to anything or anyone in the outer world that would take away or limit our freedom or the freedom of others, anyone who seeks to take away the dizzying freedom and responsibility that are the core of a true democracy.

This morning, however, I would like us to focus more on inner freedom. Note that when the apostle Paul talks about freedom in his letter to the Galatians, he is not talking about outer freedom; he is not talking about being free from the yoke of Roman rule. He is talking about being free from those forces within us that would enslave us.

When Paul identifies what he calls “works of the flesh,” he is talking about forces within us that would lead us away from a life in the Spirit. These “works of the flesh” are negative thoughts, negative feelings, and negative attitudes. Negative or hurtful behavior arise from the delusional belief systems of idolatry and egocentrism. When we become caught in this delusional way of thinking, seeing, and feeling, we are not in the kingdom of God.

Since negative behavior arises from within, it seems that a good place to start in our quest for the kingdom of God is with our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Paul tells us that negative thoughts and feelings, which we, at first glance, believe to be self-serving, function to limit or take away our freedom. They prevent us from doing what God wants. Since our lives are ultimately grounded in the Spirit of God, Paul says that deep down we really want to do the will of God, even if we do not realize this or if we forget it.

Paul tells us not to “submit to a yoke of slavery.” We can become enslaved by hurts or resentments. When we are unable to forgive, we are not free. We become enslaved to a feeling,

an emotion, a certain picture of others or ourselves. We cling to the feeling or belief that we were betrayed or victimized. We feel a sense of injustice that things happened the way they did. For as long as we hold onto these hurt feelings from the past, we are not free to live a loving and compassionate life in the present.

We can become enslaved by anger. We have a certain picture of how the world ought to be, or how other people ought to be, or how certain people ought to be. When reality does not match our picture, or when people do not meet our expectations, we become angry. We may become enraged or filled with hate. In those moments, we become addicted to the desire for control; we would like to take away the freedom of the other person. We would like the other person to be the way we want him or her to be.

If we look at situations where we are angry, we will see two things. First, we will realize that *anger is always a sign of weakness*. The psychologist C. G. Jung tells us that “emotion arises at the point of our weakest adaptation,” i.e., the place where we are most vulnerable. Because we feel vulnerable, anger arises to make us appear and feel strong. Second, when this happens, we lose our flexibility to respond constructively and sensitively to the situation. We become enslaved not only to our negative emotion, but also to our egocentric picture of how life and other people ought to be. The more attached we are to our little picture, the more resentful we become that life or others do not fit that picture. If we are to become free from the anger that poisons our soul, we need to be less egocentric and more Christ-centric.

The apostle Paul tells us that love casts out fear. And isn't fear at the root of all prejudice—the fear of someone who is different, the fear of someone's difference? Love requires freedom, the freedom to be our authentic selves in a relationship, and to accept, validate, love, and support the self-actualization of the person we love. The more we become caught in fear, the more we try to control, dominate, manipulate, enslave, or hurt others. This is not the life to which Jesus calls us! A prerequisite of love is freedom, both our freedom and the freedom of the other person, the person whom we love.

I love my children and my grandchildren, especially my new little granddaughter Emerson Blair, who is really cute. I want them to grow in ways that are physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. I want to protect them from harm. I want to spare them the consequences of stupid mistakes. But how far would I go to this end? If someone were to offer me access to a special computer that would program anything I wanted into my children's lives, into my grandchildren's lives, would I be tempted to do it? (That's a rhetorical question. Of course, I would be tempted to do it! I would, at the very least, make all of them New York Yankee fans!)

However, if I thought about it for a moment or two, *and especially if I prayed about it*, I would probably begin to see why I should pass up this tempting offer. I might realize that in programming my children or grandchildren's lives through this special computer, I would be playing God. Then I might realize that if God wouldn't do this (*and God, who can do this, has chosen not to do this*), why would I think of doing it?

As we join in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us think about those thoughts, feelings, attitudes, emotions, and especially those prejudices that enslave us, that take away our freedom to be the loving persons God wants us to be, and that also take away the freedoms of our brothers and sisters. Let us remember the words of the apostle Paul:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Paul tells us that we are called to a special kind of freedom. He tells us that through love we should become *enslaved* to Christ and each other. By the way, I know nothing about the Aramaic language, the language that Jesus spoke, and just as little about Hebrew and Greek, the languages in which our Bible was written. It just seems to me that, at least in the New Testament, that the words "slave" and "servant" are used interchangeably. If this is true, then in place of being enslaved to someone, we should think about serving that person. This is a long way from wanting others to be enslaved to us or to serve us! It reminds us of the deep wisdom of the Prayer of Saint Francis.

By the way, remind me to tell you some time about an experience I had the first time I visited the Franciscan monastery in Assisi, Italy, an experience that solidified my choice of Francis as my patron saint. It had to do with Francis and the doves.

Paul calls us forth into the freedom that comes to those who follow Christ, those who serve Christ. The fruit of discipleship is freedom from the negative emotions and negative behaviors that enslave us. The fruit of discipleship is the fruit of the Spirit: the feelings or behavior of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

On this Fourth of July weekend, let us celebrate freedom. Let us celebrate the freedom that is ours as Americans and the sacrifice of those who made this freedom possible. Let us remember those within our society and around the world who are not free and let us commit ourselves to work tirelessly for their liberation.

And let us also identify those negative feelings and emotions that enslave us, that take away the freedom to experience inner peace, and the ability to be in loving relationships with our brothers and sisters.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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