

ARE YOU REALLY FREE?

(07/02/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 16:1-15
John 8:31-36

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31)

Around the fourth of July, our celebration of the process by which our nation gained its political and economic independence from England, we are reminded of the issue of freedom.

In many ways, the history of our country has been inextricably interwoven with the matter of freedom. Because the emigration of the Pilgrims and Puritans was over an issue of freedom--the freedom to worship God as they pleased, our identity as New Englanders and our roots in the congregational tradition are tied to freedom. The Civil War was a struggle for freedom, for a people to be freed from the bonds of slavery, as also was the labor movement and the struggle of LGBTQ+ people for human rights in this century. The women's liberation movement has been a struggle for freedom--women's freedom to claim their rights politically, economically, and their rights over their own bodies, their own reproductive system. This movement as well as the LGBTQ movement has made us aware that both men and women have the right to be free from the enslaving sex and gender-role stereotypes of our patriarchal culture.

In the sociopolitical realm, the course of history can be interpreted as a movement toward freedom. In the early years of humankind, because lifestyles were defined quite rigidly by the necessities of life, there was little latitude for an individual to carve out his/her own meaning in life different or apart from that of the rest of the group. Identity was collective, not individual. The history of progress in civilization has been the history of people who have fought their way free of the political, social, economic, and religious shackles that bound them, people who were brave enough to think, to dream, and to work toward the fulfillment of their dreams, people who opened up new possibilities of life for others by their struggles.

A powerful force, however, has kept the movement toward personal and national freedom from being smooth. As the existential psychoanalyst Erich Fromm suggests in his book *Escape from Freedom*, freedom brings with it a certain amount of isolation, anxiety, responsibility, and the possibility of failure, tensions which many people seem reluctant to bear. As a consequence of this existential fear, this existential anxiety, some people hand over their precious freedom to someone else, to people who have a need to control others in ways that infringe on individuality, on God-given, on constitutional rights. Those who have a need or a desire to control others may even take away the freedom, the individuality of people whom they love. This happens not uncommonly in relationships and within the family.

This morning we listened to a small part of the story of the Great Exodus. As you recall, Moses was trying to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to a land that could be their own, a land where they could discover their own identity and live out their own God-given meaning in life. Moses, initially reluctantly, initially fearfully, went to a great deal of trouble to instigate and then lead this miraculous exodus. He was led on by a dream, a vision that had been planted in him by God, a dream not only for himself but for all his people.

As we heard this morning, the Israelites resisted the hardships that inevitably accompany a journey toward freedom. They constantly whined and complained. They told Moses and Aaron they would rather die as slaves in Egypt than carve out a new life for themselves in the wilderness, rather than fight for a land of their own in Canaan. It was as if part of them wanted to be free, but part of them felt it would be easier, more comfortable to remain slaves. And, of course, it would! However, as we know, there is a price for everything! And there is a very high price for giving up our freedom!

We don't have to go back to the history of ancient Israel to illustrate our tendency to abdicate the rights and responsibilities of freedom. The Bill of Rights in our nation's Constitution protects what our founders considered to be unalienable, God-given rights, God-given freedoms, but the majority of citizens seldom take advantage of these rights and are lax when it comes to protecting them. The battle for individual freedom within our country is being fought out day by day in the Supreme Court and the Justice Department. Within our own and other countries, there are religious groups that would limit people's legitimate rights and freedoms because they believe they know what God wants--not only for them but for all of us, and who believe they have a right and a divine call to impose their religious views and values on everyone.

Our scripture lesson helps us to realize that the struggle for freedom is not entirely an external battle, like the one we fought against England. It is also a battle within us, for each of us has to fight the tendency to yield the responsibility for our life to someone else. The American philosopher and educator John Dewey, writing in 1939, just before our involvement in World War II, made the following observation:

The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions of conditions similar to those which have given a victory to external authority, discipline, uniformity, and dependence upon The Leader in foreign countries. The battlefield is accordingly here--within ourselves and our institutions [...]. It [this battle] can be won only by extending the application of democratic methods, methods of consultation, persuasion, negotiation, communication, cooperative intelligence, in the task of making

our own politics, industry, education, our culture generally, a servant and an evolving manifestation of democratic ideas.

John Dewey had an interesting philosophy of education. Dewey believed freedom is not the starting point, but rather the goal of education. It is something that takes a lot of discipline, a lot of hard work. We can work toward achieving vocational freedom through education or job training, eventually realizing the freedom to engage in satisfying work. We can become freer as persons, free of our past and our psychological complexes through psychotherapy or by entering into growth experiences of some kind. We can become freer in our relationships with each other, free of our conditioned expectations of ourselves and other people, but this takes honest, self-conscious reflection. Freedom is not a given, not the starting point in life; it is rather the goal toward which we strive, a goal that has been fulfilled most deeply by persons like Jesus and the Buddha. If we work hard enough, freedom may be the end product.

We may not be thrilled with Dewey's notion that freedom is attained only through years of discipline, of hard work, if it is ever fully attained in one lifetime, but what would lead us to believe that this precious gift should come without high cost? What makes us think that as individuals we shouldn't have to fight for our freedom—fight just as the ancient Israelites fought against those who would enslave them and also fight against the parts of themselves that would accept conditions of servitude? The temptation to give up our freedom and to take away the freedom of others to achieve or maintain social and cultural stability appears to be strong not only in our nation but in other nations as well.

With regard to relationships, many individuals remain trapped in unhealthy dependencies long after they become conscious of them, long after they know they should move on. These individuals are afraid of fighting, are afraid of the loneliness that often accompanies freedom, or they are afraid they will not be able to cope with life, afraid they will make a mess of things once they attain the freedom that should be theirs. In theological language, this stance, the stance of the ancient Israelites, would be described as being tied to the power of sin.

If you believe it is a sin to claim your individuality, to validate your subjectivity, to affirm yourself if it offends or inconveniences others, then you are in a bind. If you believe it is a sin to admit you made a mistake in the choice of a marital partner or a mistake to stay in the relationship the way it is, then you are in a bind. If your theology is built around a God who values peace at any price, a God who cannot accept mistakes, you will throw away your freedom. We need to remember how much God values human freedom. As the deliverer of the plagues, God killed many people to get the Israelites out of Egypt!

This was the insight that came to Jesus' disciples, that came to Paul and the early leaders of the church. Paul knew that a person might have to offend or hurt others to say what needed to

be said or to do what needed to be done. This was what the disciples learned from following Jesus, for Jesus stepped on many people's toes. I don't know what makes us think that God does not walk with us on the road to freedom or accompany us in the battles we must undertake!

Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Paul writes to the Christians at Rome:

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness. But thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin have become slaves of righteousness.

You see, what if handing away our freedom, not being ourselves fully, is a sin? What if not becoming and being the individual, unique human being God calls us to be is the "sin against the Holy Spirit," the sin which can never be forgiven? You have the freedom and the responsibility to make of yourself what you will! God wants you to claim the freedom which is given you!

As the apostle Paul points out, it is ours to choose to what or to whom we will become enslaved--to another person, to our society, to secular standards of success, to the fear of assuming responsibility, or the fear of making a mistake. We choose, we create the world in which we live. To become "slaves to God" means to grow, to become the individuals God wants us to become. The God whom Jesus showed us, whom Jesus incarnated, would not bind us to historically outdated scriptural legalisms. We need to be free from any god or any mistaken concept of God that would stifle our healthy growth as persons. God wants us to grow as individuals and in our relationship with others. God is willing, very willing to accept our mistakes as we travel along. This is a comforting realization, because we certainly will make mistakes! Our acceptance of the call to pursue and embrace the real freedom is the first step as well as the final goal of the journey.

In his letter to the church at Galatia, Paul wrote: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Take the responsibility for your life and then step forward! As the ancient Israelites learned so long ago, if you begin your journey toward freedom, you will find that God is walking with you!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.