

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

July 6, 2008

Freedom

Leviticus 19:1-3, 11-12, 15-17; Galatians 5:13-25

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today we will sing together a familiar hymn, celebrating our nation's heritage, which concludes with the stirring words, "From every mountainside, let freedom ring!" Freedom has been a motivating ideal for us as a people since the founding of our nation and before. The poet Langston Hughes seems to capture the essence of freedom's appeal when he proclaims in verse,

There are words like *Freedom*  
Sweet and wonderful to say.  
On my heartstrings freedom sings  
All day every day.

No matter how much we profess our love of freedom, however, we must all be aware that there is no single definition of what it means. In fact, there are numerous kinds of freedom, some of which are mutually exclusive of the other. In politics, this becomes the stuff of legislative battles and court cases as different kinds of freedom are balanced, one against the other.

In the early 1960's the city of Phoenix was the site of a national lawyer's convention. It was a matter of great consternation and embarrassment to many in the city when one of the main hotels in town was refusing to admit Jewish guests. The city council intended to put the problem to rest by proposing a citywide "public accommodations law," forbidding businesses from discriminating against customers on the basis of race, color, or religion.

Unlike the reception such a proposal might have generated in other places in that time period, the citizens of Phoenix who came to comment on the ordinance during a public hearing were overwhelmingly in favor of it. There was, however, one exception: an articulate and tall 39-

year-old attorney who stood up to speak for “the historic right of the owner of a drug store, lunch counter or theatre to choose his own customer.” Here was a classic case of conflict between two understandings of what freedom means, or, at least, whose freedom will be honored and whose will be denied.

On that day, the freedom of the customer to patronize a business of their own choosing won out. And, the debate itself would not have rated even a footnote in the history books had the attorney who opposed this outcome not been named William Rehnquist, the man who would become one of the longest serving justices in the history of the Supreme Court, including his 19 years as the Chief Justice of the Court until 2005.

William Rehnquist and his successor John Roberts have presided over numerous cases where one or more kinds of freedom are at stake. A very recent court case brought greater definition to the second amendment right of freedom to bear arms; handguns were at issue in this instance. Opposing sides in this case both share a common desire to be free from the menace of crime where they live and work. However, their strategies for attaining that end differ radically. The Supreme Court sided with the group that wants more guns not fewer ones.

Other recent decisions have dealt with the issue of habeas corpus; a legal instrument which safeguards individual liberty against arbitrary or lawless state action. Long a principal of English common law, the Supreme Court has decreed the government must declare why an individual is being held in custody. In other words, the government is bound by particular rules and cannot arbitrarily imprison individuals without charge or due process.

The debates which go along with such legal questions beg even larger questions, “What freedoms matter the most?” “What kind of freedom is worth living for, fighting for, dying for?”

I'd like to pose these questions Biblically, because it is certainly true that the Bible talks about freedom a great deal. Paul says in one place, "For freedom, Christ has set you free," and in another, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

What does Paul have in mind when he says such things? Freedom from what? And, equally important, freedom for what?

As to the first question, the Bible has a single answer. The freedom that matters most is freedom from sin. It is sin that afflicts us and enslaves us. It is sin that ruins our best efforts and distorts our noblest intentions. It is sin that makes us selfish and greedy, even when we do not want to be those things. It is sin that erodes the connection between ourselves and our neighbors. It is sin that separates us from God and brings death.

In his letters, including his Letter to the Galatians from which we have read today, Paul attacks a view, widespread in his day, which says that the answer to sin is Law, "a law chiseled in stone" is one way that he describes it, referring to the commandments given to Moses. Just by following a set of rules, we can never free ourselves from the ravages of sin and the damage it brings. The Law cannot save us, Paul insists, only Christ can. In a restored relationship with God through Christ we experience the only kind of freedom that really matters. It is a new law, if you will, which Christ writes upon our hearts.

Because we hear so many competing definitions of freedom, it is hard for us, even as Christians, to speak about this one freedom which must come before any other. One freedom, to establish or to judge all the rest: the freedom from sin.

Several years ago, Peggy was teaching Vacation Bible School and trying to explain to the class that Jesus had died for us. The children all wondered aloud, "why did he have to die?"

“Because of our sins,” Peggy said. That, of course, is the answer that classical Christianity always must give though it’s a pretty difficult concept for a group of kindergarteners.

So it was that one child in the group put his hands on his hips and shouted out indignantly, “But I’m not a sinner!”

How do we explain this idea, not only to children but to adults as well, that none of us is as good or whole or righteous as we might think ourselves to be apart from Christ? After all, we have been so thoroughly indoctrinated by the idea that there is nothing so bad about us or evil in the human person that the right kind of legislation or litigation or communication or education cannot fix it! Yet, all the while, our world continues in an ever-tightening spiral of violence. Our families and children face daily threats to their health and well-being. And we ourselves give in to desires and patterns that destroy us.

On this weekend in which we celebrate the freedoms of our nation, it must be noted that many who struggled so mightily for American independence were motivated by the very idea that freedom from sin matters above all else. Jonas Clark, the Congregational minister who hid John Hancock and Samuel Adams on the night of Paul Revere’s ride, once said in a sermon, “The gospel of Jesus Christ is the source of liberty, the soul of government, and the life of a people.”

Among the founders of our nation, there was considerable debate, as still exists in our own day, about the role and reach of government. However, those early proponents of American liberty would be appalled to know that the language of freedom has, in our own day, been used by some who seek to justify the unfettered accumulation of wealth and unrestrained consumerism. They would be perplexed by the attempt to link freedom to the absence of material want or the right to affordable housing, medical care, or prescription drugs. They would be

horrified to discover that freedom of any kind is invoked in the purveying of pornography, the spread of legalized gambling, or the pursuit of selfish individualism, just to name a few. John Zubly, a Presbyterian minister and member of the Continental Congress wrote, “Liberty does not consist in living without all restraint . . . a more unhappy situation could not easily be devised unto mankind, than that every man should have it in his power to do what is right in his own eyes.”

It is freedom from sin which matters most, a freedom we receive humbly and joyfully by the grace of God, a freedom that comes only through Christ’s forgiving love. However, freedom has its purpose, too. We are freed not only from something, but we are freed for something, as well. Samuel West, another of those colonial preachers put it this way, “to have a liberty to do whatever is fit, reasonable, or good, is the highest freedom.”

Thus, freedom in its truest sense, in its Biblical meaning, is not only about being freed from sin, it is also about being freed for good deeds. Freedom cannot be about detachment or disengagement, or an attitude of “no one can tell me what to do.” Rather true freedom is about forging the closest link with God and our neighbor. Never set apart. Never exclusive. Always connected. Indeed this is freedom’s paradox: the more we are connected to those around us and to God, the more freedom we enjoy.

I have no way of explaining what this looks like other than having you consider those people of great faith whom you have been privileged to know. If you need help identifying who those people are, just remember the list of the Spirit’s fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you think about folk who exhibit these qualities, surely you can agree that they are neither slave to fashion nor to the expectations of

others. They speak their mind truthfully, never with evil intent. They are generous and kind, often unconcerned about possessions, unworried about the future. They are free in every way.

Yet, they never use their freedom as an excuse to say, “leave me alone,” or “I’ll do whatever I please.” In fact, they seem to enjoy nothing more than lending an ear, or a hand, when it is needed. Further they are willing to enter situations and confront problems that would make most of us flee away, but they do so gently, joyfully, without being immobilized by fear. Again, they are free men and women, and they are deeply bound to God.

Martin Luther said it so well, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” This, then, is our freedom, the kind of freedom that flows forth whenever God’s Spirit is present. It is never the kind of freedom that advances the cause of one person or group at the expense of another. This is the freedom that is truly available to all people. No state can deny it. No king can take it from us. No government can destroy it. No human power can threaten it. For it is God’s gift to us: to be free from sin and free to serve Him.

Amen.