

**“The Predicament of Freedom”**  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Galatians 5:13-14  
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*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.* Galatians 5:13

I begin by sharing words that speak of the core idea that lies at the heart of the democratic experiment called the United States of America.

Patrick Henry at the Virginia convention, 1775: “I know not what course others may take but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.”

The Declaration of Independence July 4<sup>th</sup>, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1776: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights – that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Abraham Lincoln, at Gettysburg, in the fall of 1863: “Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The 2006 version of The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag: “One nation indivisible, under God, with liberty and justice for all.”

Liberty, freedom.

230 years ago, when the Continental Congress declared the separation of the 13 American colonies from Great Britain, it was this idea, the idea of liberty that was foremost in the minds of our nation’s founders. It was an idea that did not originate with them, of course. In every age, human beings have yearned “to breathe free,” as the inscription on the Statue of Liberty puts it so dramatically.

To breathe free.

Three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson penned the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, an enslaved people in Egypt had cried out for freedom, and God sent a man named Moses to tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Twenty-three hundred years before John Hancock and Button Gwinnett affixed their signatures to the Declaration of Independence, the prophet Isaiah had described the mission of the servant people of God as that of proclaiming “liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners”. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jesus of Nazareth stood in the synagogue of his home town and announced that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit “to proclaim release to captives . . . to let the oppressed go free.” (Luke 4:18)

Later, he said to his closest followers “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free; if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31, 36)

The idea of freedom, of liberty, is at the core of our faith heritage. There are more than fifty references to freedom in the New Testament, and in each of them the writers of scripture explore the dimensions of what Paul calls, “the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (II Corinthians 3:17)

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth echoes these profound New Testament insights as he defines the church as being “those who are freely called by the Word of grace and by the Spirit and by God’s love to be the children of God.” I do not know a more beautiful definition of the church. Who are we? We are those who are freely called by the Word of grace.

Freedom is a hard notion to understand, regardless of era or epoch.

In the very beginning of the Christian Movement, the Galatian church struggled with what it meant to be freely called by the Word of grace. Paul argued that there was no reason for members of that congregation to submit to the yoke of bondage under the law, because Christ had given them the gift of freedom. The church was divided into two camps: those who believed that one had to become a Jew, that is, to be circumcised, before one could become a Christian – that was one side of the argument. Then, there were those who said, and whom Paul agreed with, that whether you follow the ritual or not does not count for anything. What really counts is faith working through love. (Galatians 5:6)

Stirred into the pot of this argument over freedom were the ideas of Gnostic teachers who were urging the Galatians to be both free from the law and free from everything else. These teachers were urging the early Christians to pay no attention to their responsibilities to one another, a notion that Paul found to be as unacceptable as enslavement to the thousands of do's and don'ts in the law. "Do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become servants of one another, for the whole law is summed up in this single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. " (Galatians 5:13-14)

Each generation of Christians must learn anew that Christian liberty is a function of fidelity to the rule of love, just as each generation of Americans must learn anew that civil liberty is always a function of justice. The rule is the rule of love, and love as it is lived out in the civil order is always justice. The rule of love has really no don'ts and only one do: love your neighbor as yourself, not instead of yourself, but develop the capacity to understand that the needs and rights of others matter as much as your own needs and wants and rights.

How strange these ancient words from our sacred text and from the founding texts of our democracy sound. How strange they sound in an era in which self-indulgence has become an obsession, and indifference to the well-being of others has become an entirely acceptable way of living. And yet, we know, this Independence Day weekend, that there is something more important than satisfying our narcissistic impulses to care only about ourselves.

I came across some words some years ago that I have turned to again and again because they speak profoundly about freedom to me: “To be free from the need to love or the demands of justice; to be untouched by the cry of a little baby or the needs of its parents to care for him; to be unmoved by the terror of war or the prospect of peace; to be without the strings of remembrance or the bonds of hope; to be totally free is the shape of death.” To be free to love – to be free to love is life itself.

Before we come to Christ’s table this morning where a free meal will be served to us with all the grace, all the forgiveness, all the spiritual nourishment we could ever want or need, I want to think with you for a moment about what freedom might mean in our personal lives and what it ought to mean in the public sphere.

If freedom is the most basic characteristic of the life God makes possible in Christ, why is it so hard for us to live as free human beings? I am talking now about you and me, having been granted the blessing of freedom, why can we not receive it and live within it as God intends?

The Galatians are a sobering case in point: “You were running well,” Paul writes to them. What persuaded you to do a U-turn in the middle of the road and go back to where you were all boxed in? One of the reasons is that freedom creates a genuine predicament. To be free is to accept both the gift of freedom and the responsibility that goes with it. Responsibility can be burdensome. Sometimes it seems easier to remain tied up and balled up and locked up than to step out in faith, trusting God, living in the midst of the risks that come with being free.

There was more than the argument of circumcision that was at stake in the Galatians controversy. To accept freedom would require that people put on patience and self-control and bear one another’s burdens, because freedom means moving beyond self and into the risk of love and the demand of service. (Charles Cousar, *Galatians*)

Here’s the deal about freedom: God gave it to us from the very beginning. God could have made humans as puppets so that whenever God wanted to do something, God would just pull a string, and we would do it, but what kind of relationship would that be between the human and

divine? God created us free, giving us the power to choose. But there is something in us – theologians would call it sin – that keeps us so often from being able to choose the good. Without the liberating act of God’s love in Christ, we would never be able to do anything but live under the tyranny of self.

Though we might pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” what we really want is for our will to be done, and only God can set us free for the mutuality and the responsibility for which we were made. In most cases, the movement toward the freedom we have been granted takes a lifetime of stepping out and falling back, but coming to realize day after day, year after year, that God is and will be the ground beneath our feet. We discover that we find our true and highest self when we are able to let go of our self-absorption and learn to live for others.

Maya Angelou tells of hearing a young woman introduce herself by saying “Hello. I am so-and-so (she said her name) and I am a Christian.” Maya Angelou was surprised and she responded, “What? Already?” (as told by Bill Bolling of the Atlanta Community Food Bank)

It takes awhile to fit into the new life that Christ makes possible. Freedom is a gift, but it is not license to do whatever we like. We can do whatever we want to, to be sure, but it will be to our own hurt and to the hurt of others. By the grace of God, freedom is growing in to the new person who is able to live according to the law of love.

I do not know anything about the religious life of Warren Buffet, but I do know that his extraordinary bequest to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation reflects the essence of the kind of freedom of which Paul wrote. The Gates and Mr. Buffet, who can do whatever they want to, and can make sure that every person born, generation after generation to their family, can do whatever they want to - but they are pleased to try to solve some of the world’s greatest problems. They are pleased to try to find cures for some of the world’s most fatal diseases. Where does that impulse come from? I believe it comes from God, who gave us freedom and who urges us not to use it for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.

I read this week a sort of a billionaire joke. It's hard to imagine what billionaires actually say to one another, but the newspaper reports that back in 1994, Mr. Buffet was present when Melinda and Bill Gates, not yet married, were at a jewelry store picking out Melinda's engagement ring. Warren Buffet said, "Bill, I don't know how much you love Melinda, but when I got married, I spent 6% of my net worth on my wife's diamond ring." It's a real knee-slapper, I guess, if you're a billionaire.

Though none of us can imagine dealing with such vast amounts of wealth, we can be inspired by three American capitalists whose self-interest is enlightened by compassion for others. God has made us as one human family so that we belong to one another. Another person's suffering is, in a real sense, our own suffering. None of us is free when others languish in prisons of poverty, prejudice, and disease. I think of something Frederick Buechner once wrote, and I use it as a test to see if I am still a functioning moral agent: If you have not cried for someone other than yourself in the last year, then chances are you're dead already.

Freedom and responsibility can never be put asunder. They are irrevocably joined together in the heart of God, and in our own hearts, by the hand of God.

Freedom, freedom for one another; freedom for God; freedom for a life without walls that keep us confined in the kingdom of "me, myself, and I," where our taskmasters are impulses, appetites, and anxieties about whether we are going to be all right, and will we have enough. To step out of that prison, to relax a little, to worry less, and love more – that is God's project for the human race. I don't know why we can't be more gracious about living the kind of life God makes possible.

On this Sunday before Independence Day, just one last word about freedom and our great American civil society. It is especially important for Americans to remember in 2006, as the war on terrorism continues and presents our nation with a genuine predicament: how to protect the safety of our citizens and the rights guaranteed by our Constitution - that we must hold both together.

Benjamin Franklin's warning in 1755 bears repeating today: "Those who give up essential liberty to purchase a temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." Let us be vigilant in protecting the well-being of all Americans. Let us be equally vigilant in protecting those basic American principles of due process of law and respect for individual rights, lest these great American principles themselves become victims of the terrorists and give them what they want, which is the destruction of a nation dedicated to the great idea of liberty and justice for all. I believe that the United States has a particular calling. As the servant people of long ago, our calling is to model justice and to model liberty that we might be a light to all the nations of the world.

The great American poet Archibald Macleish wrote, "There are those who say that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind, are nothing but a dream. They are right. It is a dream. It is the American dream." I would say that, in whatever land and among whatever people the dream of freedom appears, let it be remembered, that the dream originated in the very heart of God; and that every human hope for liberty is a derivative of God's divine hope for all people. Let freedom be the vision that holds us. Let freedom be the vision in which we hold our neighbors now, and as long as human civilization exists. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.