

Give Me Liberty Or Give Me Death

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on June 28, 1998. Scripture lessons: Galatians 5:1, 13-25.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

No words in the English language are spoken more passionately than the words *freedom* and *liberty*. *Freedom and Liberty* are enshrined in our nation's collective memory. Every school child can quote the stirring words of Patrick Henry spoken on the eve of the American Revolution, "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take but as for me: *give me liberty or give me death!*" The Declaration of Independence asserts, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, *Liberty* and the pursuit of Happiness." The Constitution of the United States was ordained and established to "secure the blessings of *liberty* to ourselves and our posterity." Abraham Lincoln, standing on the bloody, war-torn Gettysburg battle field claimed that our nation was "conceived in *Liberty*" and he prayed for "a new birth of *freedom*."

On January 6, 1941, President Roosevelt addressed the U.S. Congress. He said that four freedoms are essential to a flourishing democracy: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. In 1942, the popular artist, Norman Rockwell, illustrated Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" using his New England neighbors as models. He remembered how his friend, Jim Edgerton, had stood up in a town meeting and said something that everybody else disagreed with. But they let him have his say. No one shouted him down. "That's it!" Rockwell thought. "*Freedom of Speech*." You can, perhaps, remember that painting: a common ordinary man dressed in work clothes standing up and speaking out for what he believed in.

Rockwell painted *Freedom from Want* on Thanksgiving Day in 1942. He pictured a grandmotherly woman bringing a large Thanksgiving turkey to a table surrounded by her family. *Freedom from Fear* pictures a mother and father tucking their two small children into bed .

Rockwell painted that picture during the bombings of London by the German Luftwaffe. *Freedom of Religion* shows men and women of all races praying. One woman holds a rosary. A Jew wearing a yarmulke holds a prayer book. An African looks heavenward. Each person prays to their own God in their own way but all the people are facing in the same direction. Anyone who views those four paintings, *The Four Freedoms*, will not soon forget them.

That popular series of four paintings should raise some serious questions for us. We Americans enjoy *freedom of speech*, but what should we say and how should we say it? Can we do any better than Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern? The apostle Paul advised Christians not to use our freedom to say things that stir up quarrels and dissensions and factions. And we enjoy *freedom from want* like no other nation in history but how do we deal with superabundance and affluence? And how do we relate as Christians to an economic system that artificially creates new wants? St. Paul writes, "let us *not* use our freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." And we enjoy *freedom of worship* in the United States, but having that freedom how are we going to worship?—Who are we going to worship?—Saint Paul warns Christians of the danger, the threat, of idolatry when we enjoy freedom to worship.

Perhaps the freedom that we most *imperfectly* enjoy is freedom from fear. There's so much fear in the world and in the United States. Recently a young man trying to escape the stifling atmosphere of a small town said to a visiting friend, "One thing that I like about living in New York as opposed to Oxford, is the freedom. Here in New York there's freedom to live the life-style I choose - to eat where I want and to dress as I like. Freedom." Then he closed his door, locked the latch, turned the dead bolt, inserted the chain, and switched on the electronic alarm system. Then he told his small town friend, "Don't dare open that door without switching off the alarm or all hell will break loose and the cops may shoot you dead." Freedom from fear is illusive even in America.

Paul's letter to the Christian churches in the Roman province of Galatia has been called the Christian's emancipation proclamation. In this letter Paul asserts that the Christian is the most free person of all. Christ has set us free - freed us from fear of death and hell; freed us

even from the fear of life. Freed us from slavery to sin. Christ has freed us from want - in Christ we have all we need and Christ fulfills our deepest wants. Christ has freed us to speak to bear witness to God's love, grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. Christ has freed us to love God and our neighbors.

It's ^{not} strange that Paul had such an exalted view of freedom because he spent many years of his ministry behind bars in prison, stripped of his freedom, chained to a Roman guard. A few years ago, a Methodist bishop from the African nation of Angola visited the United States. Angola had just experienced a revolution that brought Marxist communists to power. The bishop fielded all kinds of questions. "What's it like to be the church in a Marxist country that puts so many restrictions on religious freedom? Is the new Marxist government supportive of the church?" "No, but we don't ask it to be supportive." "Have there been tensions?" "Yes! Not long ago the government decreed that we should disband all women's organizations in the church but the women kept meeting. The government is not yet strong enough to do much about it." "But what will you do when the government becomes stronger?" "Well," the Bishop responded, "we'll keep meeting. The government does what it needs to do. The church does what we need to do. If we go to jail for being the church, we'll go to jail. Jail is a wonderful place for Christian evangelism. Our church made some of its most dramatic gains during the revolution when so many of us were in jail. In jail, you have everyone there, in one place. In jail you're free to preach and teach. Sure, twenty of our Methodist pastors were killed during the revolution, but we came out of jail a much larger and stronger church. Don't worry about the church in Angola; We're doing well. Frankly, I'd find it much more difficult to be a pastor in ~~North Carolina~~ ^{The U.S.}. Here, there's so much. It must be hard to be the church here." How free, really, is the church in the United States, to serve God? How do we use our freedom to serve God and love our neighbors?

Last week I heard the Rev. William Sloan Coffin say, "We have altered the meaning of freedom. To our revolutionary forbears the word freedom was practically synonymous with virtue. Freedom to Lincoln was not to do as you please. It was *the freedom to be pleased to do*

as we ought. Returning to Revolutionary times Sam Adams wrote, 'It is not possible for any state to long remain free where virtue is not supremely honored'. Because freedom was practically synonymous with virtue we turned out a generation of politicians name Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Hamilton. Today, with a population 80 times the 3 million who were Americans in 1776 we don't produce leaders like that anymore. And the reason is clear. As Plato said, 'What is honored in a country will be cultivated there.' We have fantastic athletes and generally inferior politicians and we deserve them both because we have so cruelly separated freedom from virtue."

The apostle Paul couldn't have said it better. Saint Paul inextricably links freedom and virtue. We can't be a free people without being good. We cannot be truly free if we're led by our flesh to do and say whatever we feel like, whenever we feel like it. True freedom is found only in serving others. We can be truly free only if we're led by God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Freedom, the kind of freedom that Christ emancipated us for brings love, joy, peace, ~~patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness in all our relationships, gentleness, and self-control~~ in the midst of plenty.

Forty years ago one of our nations greatest patriots and advocates of freedom was murdered. In his best remembered sermon he echoed St. Paul's theme of freedom. "Let freedom ring!" the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King shouted. "When we allow freedom to ring - when we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last.'"

Let us pray: Almighty God, Father of Jesus Christ, and author of all liberty, we have read in your word that where your Spirit is there is liberty. We pray today that the Spirit of Jesus Christ may take the truth that we have heard, apply it to our lives, enable us to respond in faith and commitment, until in surrender to you we become free men and women, your agents, to recreate a new and free world, in the strong name of Jesus, our Liberator and Lord, we pray. Amen.