

July 4, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Faces of Freedom

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Galatians 5:13-15

Perhaps it is just because I once had a love affair with sailing, or maybe it's that tall ships were so much a part of our country's 200th birthday celebration, but ever since the Bicentennial, I associate the Fourth of July with those tall ships almost as much as I do with fireworks. The association is a good one, I think. There is an image of freedom in those tall proud vessels. And too, many of us Americans while in school were invited to memorize Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, *O Ship of State* which begins with these lines:

*Thou too, sail on, O Ship of State,
Sail on, O Union strong and great.*

Two hundred thirty-four years ago today, our Ship of State did set sail, and while to native Americans and Blacks the voyage did not appear promising, to others it appeared uniquely so. Ours is the longest lasting revolution in the world. The liberties established way back then in a remote agrarian backwater of the world have miraculously survived and at times flourished.

We weren't just another nation; we were a whole new world. With freedom and justice as our hammer and chisel, we were going to carve out a better life not only for our own people, but for the rest of humanity as well. The American dream was to dispel the world's nightmares.

As the years rolled by, we seemed to be holding course, more or less. Lincoln called us: “God’s *almost* chosen people,” and “the last best hope for democracy.” We became the haven for Europe’s “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” and as recently as World War II, Churchill, in a grateful and encouraging cable to Roosevelt, quoted Longfellow at greater length:

*Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State,
Sail on, O Union strong and great.
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hope of future years,
Hangs breathless on thy fate.*

Have you noticed that nobody sends us telegrams like that anymore?

Paradoxically, now that we’ve become the most powerful and richest nation in the world, we haven’t the same influence we once had when, as a people, we were weak and poor. The American way of life is no longer the automatic choice of other folk. And at home the hammer of freedom is so frequently divorced from the chisel of justice that the common good, as often as not, is identified as the good of those who are in power.

In a way, the Tall Sailing Ships of Freedom that stood so proud in the New York and Boston harbors in 1976 seem an unlikely image of America in the 21st Century. A better image might be a cross between an oil tanker and a luxury liner, with all attention concentrated on the upper decks. But below the waterline there are leaks. Is our ship sinking?

Part of our problem is that we no longer understand what freedom is—let alone practice it. Today we think of freedom differently than our ancestors did.

For most, freedom means alternatives: to have a number of alternatives and to make choices—to make decisions within those alternatives and to function with those decisions. But, I think we ought to realize that having alternatives is no guarantee that we’re free.

Our church recently replaced one of its copiers with a new one. Before making a decision we looked at a lot of copiers. We talked to a number of vendors, saw at least 20 machines. We compared prices, features, service, and the finished product. And I admit, for a long while we seemed further away from a decision than when we began. We became almost immobilized by the alternatives.

It’s like the husband who, not used to grocery shopping, is given the list one day. And when he goes to buy laundry soap, he discovers there is an entire aisle full of products. How do you choose? Instead of freeing him, the alternatives paralyzed him. But, it’s not just choice and alternatives today; there are many faces to freedom.

Freedom has the face of anticipation. It is eight female voices humming outside a small City Hall all night, “We shall overcome.” Or, the shout of anticipation to thousands of people in Washington, D.C.’s mall, “I have a dream!”

Freedom has the face of strength. It is a politician’s exhortation, “One Union strong and great.”

But, freedom also has the face of fear. It’s as frightening and as unbelievable as a breathless whisper at the cabin door, “Mr. Lincoln says we’re free?”

For our youth, freedom has a carefree, if not irresponsible, face. It is a driver's license and an open road. "No more hassles, dude, now I'm free."

We have been brought up to be fiercely independent. For my generation the role model was the Marlboro Man. No ties, no strings, no commitments. Hang loose. Be free!

None of these faces, I'm afraid, is the face of freedom envisioned by our forbearers, or by Paul when he described Christian freedom to the Galatians.

Our 18th Century forbearers were enormously influenced by Montesquieu, the French political thinker who differentiated between despotism, and monarchy, and democracy. In each he found a special principle governing social life. For despotism that principle was fear. Imagine living under Stalin or Pol Pot or Idi Amin—fear. Yes, fear says it all.

For monarchy the principle governing social life was honor. Think Sir Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table.

Now, what do you think the principle governing social life was for democracy? Can you guess? Listen - Montesquieu says it's virtue. Yes, virtue. "It is this quality, virtue," he wrote, "rather than fear or ambition that makes things work in a democracy." Virtue—things like honesty, humility, diligence, patience, charity, temperance, and kindness.

Samuel Adams agreed: "We may look to armies for our defense, but *virtue* is our best security. It is not possible that any state should long remain free where virtue is not supremely honored."

Freedom as virtue—this is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Galatians, "For freedom, Christ has set you free." He might just as easily have written, "For virtue, Christ has set you free." Paul described a freedom **for** others, not **from** others—a freedom of service motivated by love.

Freedom, virtue—these two were practically synonymous in the minds of our revolutionary ancestors. To them it was inconceivable that an individual would be granted freedom just for the satisfaction of instincts and whims or the opportunity to become wealthy.

Freedom, virtue—they were practically synonymous a hundred years later in the mind of Abraham Lincoln, when in his second Inaugural Address he called for "a new birth of freedom."

And, freedom and virtue embrace themselves in one of America's greatest hymns:

"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on."

Our Ship of State is floundering today because in the words of the Prophet Ezekiel, "We corrupted our wisdom for the sake of our splendor." Instead of inspiring the world by fulfilling our own promises of virtue to our own people, and particularly to our poor, we have sought to redefine freedom as doing our

own thing or as economic opportunity for the fortunate. To paraphrase Ezekiel, "We corrupt our freedom, our virtue, for the sake of our splendor."

I really do love America; but, my love for her is tempered with the caution of Mark Twain. Wasn't it Twain who said, "Loyalty to your country always. Loyalty to your government when it deserves it"?

So... let us celebrate the 4th in good cheer with all the ardor of Longfellow who ended his poem with these lines:

*Sail on, O Ship of State,
Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!
Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee,
Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers,
our tears,
Our faith triumphant o'er our fears,
Are all with thee, - are all with thee.*

But in celebrating Independence Day and lauding our freedom, let us also not forget Paul's words to us this morning.

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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Galatians 5:13-15