

"CREATED FOR FREEDOM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
July 2, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

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Then there's the story of the man down in Sydney, Australia who tried to escape from jail by climbing under the hood of a van that was delivering bread to the prison. The only trouble was that when the van made its next stop and the man climbed out from under the hood...hot and dirty...he discovered that he was in the yard of another prison four miles from the one he escaped from.

On this Independence Day weekend our thoughts turn easily once again to the freedom we enjoy in this land. And we thank God for our freedom. And we thank God, too, for those men and women who have gone before us and who sacrificed so much to give us the freedom we enjoy. Our scripture lesson from Paul's letter to the Galatians is all about freedom. Hear what he says in Galatians:

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery..."
(Galatians 5: 1)

FREEDOM IS RELATIVE

Have you ever stopped to notice that freedom is relative?

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And there's a relevancy about that question even today. The rapid growth of Islam in our world today seems to many of us to embrace a new kind of slavery. Women dressed in costumes that cover their entire bodies...including their faces. And the ritual prayer - the Salat - performed five times each day facing Mecca. There's a legalism in it that is hard for many Christians to understand and one wonders why so many are embracing it.

Freedom is relative. For some there is a kind of freedom in knowing exactly what your faith requires...freedom in the little rituals and the many rules of a faith that is more black and white than Christianity.

Freedom is relative. There is more freedom in a legalistic faith that offers clear-cut, unambiguous answers than there is in a "secularity" that offers no firm guidelines for coping with a rapidly changing world like ours.

Freedom is always relative. There is no such thing as absolute freedom. Every once in a while a group comes along proclaiming that they believe in freedom from all conventional mores. Free speech, freedom of expression, free love. It's an illusion. Freedom is relative. There are times when your freedom impinges on mine. And in a free society we are always caught up in something of a "balancing act" between the freedoms of various groups.

For example, some of our most progressive laws are those calling for "universal access" to buildings. People with disabling conditions ought to be free to go to the same places you and I go. All of us, I believe, would agree with that noble sentiment but it does have complications.

Remember a few years back that Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity bought two dilapidated buildings in the South Bronx and spent something like \$ 100,000 dollars to restore them and turn them into shelters for the homeless. Remember what happened. The bureaucrats of our city told the nuns that under the city's universal access law they were forbidden to open the shelter because one building lacked a \$ 50,000 dollar elevator to accomodate the homeless who might not be able to walk. The sisters suggested that they could carry any such men to the upper floors themselves, as they do in Calcutta. No way, they were told. That would insult the dignity of the homeless. And so these Missionaries of Charity who couldn't afford another \$50,000 for the project were forced to scrap it and were forced to leave man homeless men sleeping in the streets.

One person's freedom was another person's indignity.

And religious groups occasionally are confronted with this same dilemma. Most of us like the sound of chimes. But imagine an exclusive suburban neighborhood where most of the residents sleep in on a Sunday morning. Then the local church decides to erect a bell tower to play hymns on a Sunday morning. That sort of thing brings you into a bit of a legal battle.

Even zoning laws are now affecting the right of worship in private homes. There's a minister in Colorado Springs who has been cited several times for holding religious meetings in his home...violating a city zoning ordinance. In Fairhaven, Massachusetts, local zoning officials ruled that Bible studies are home occupations and therefore prohibited under the town's property-use ordinances. And up in Stratford, Connecticut it's been noted by civil-liberties lawyers that home Bible studies are penalized while Tupperware parties enjoy the full proection of the Constitution.

Note this then as the first point: freedom is relative. St. Paul was calling persons to a higher form of freedom which prepares the way for a second point, a second thought.

FREEDOM IS ALSO RESPONSIBILITY

Freedom is also responsibility. Paul, in writing to the Galatians, says:

"For you were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another". (Galatians 5: 13)

A few verses later in the same chapter....verses nineteen and twenty.... Paul lists some of the sins of the flesh that follow when freedom is abused and perverted. Hear them:

"Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing....and the like".

Easy Paul....you're getting carried away and coming to close to home. Why it sounds like our society, doesn't it? I read somewhere recently that according to a survey that only 13% of Americans still believe in all ten of the Biblical commandments. And nine out of ten citizens admit they lie regularly. And for ten million dollars, 7 percent of our people say that they would kill a stranger. This is scary. One wonders....can a land remain free that does not have a "core" of shared values?

The next time you go to a movie...ponder the balance between freedom and license. As Doug Larson of United Feature Syndicate put it recently:

"It took only 50 years for movies to go from silent to unspeakable....."

More and more I have that uneasy feeling that we are a people who are adrift - morally. We seem to have lost sight of those Biblical principles that once were guiding us. We're a bit like Uncle Luther and Aunt Minnie and Mrs. Wood who were sitting on the front porch one evening. The two women were carrying on long conversations, trying to impress each other with how deeply religious they were. They droned on and on and at one point Aunt Minnie turned to Uncle Luther and tried to enlist his support in the battle for self-righteousness. She said,

"We both know that Mrs. Wood is a good person, but don't you think I live a little closer to the Lord?" To which Uncle Luther quietly replied, "I don't think either of you are crowding Him very much!"

We may still like to think of ourselves as a Christian nation and call ourselves such, but I honestly don't think we're crowding God very much! Do you? Freedom is responsibility. St. Paul would counsel us to,

"Not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh...."

OUR PROBLEM

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Maybe our problem is rooted in the fact that we too often look to the values of others for moral guidance...and not to

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neighbor...appeared on his roof to install his own antenna. Knowing that the man next door was a TV technician, this new neighbor positioned his antenna in exactly the same position...the same direction...as Dixon's. And then, studying the TV technician's roof a couple of moments longer, the new neighbor reached up and, with a bit of a yank, broke an arm off of his antenna. If that's the way a TV technician installed his antenna (he reasoned), then it must be correct. Let's face it...that sounds like a lot of us. Too often we look to each other for our values. We should be looking in the direction of God who has broken through to us in the life and love of Christ.

FREEDOM: ROOTED IN CHRIST

Freedom, first, is relative. Second, freedom is responsibility. Someone has said that "liberty is the luxury of self-discipline". And finally, in the third place, freedom is rooted in the life and in the love of Jesus Christ.

There is no real freedom in this world if all we have to look forward to is the darkness of the grave. Why speak of freedom at all if we are held eternally captive by sin and by death. To have any real freedom, we are going to have to escape the bondage of our own mortality.

Some of you who are football fans will recognize the name of Mike Singletary, the "All-Pro" middle line-backer of the Chicago Bears. I once read that he was known for the intensity of his eyes which are often captured by television cameras before a big play. Shortly after winning the 1986 Super Bowl, Singletary became afraid of the dark. He would find it necessary to sleep with the light on. This was no joke...he was overcome by fear. It overwhelmed his life.

If was fear of a far bigger game than football that had broken down Mike Singletary. He thought he was going to die. Apparently he had some things in his life that he needed to deal with. Even though he was a devout Christian, there were still some areas of his life that he needed to review and turn over to God and then, and only then, would he experience real freedom.

The same sort of thing holds true with us. If we are not free toward God, no matter who we are and what we may have accomplished, we are not free at all. Freedom is knowing that no power on earth can do us in, no power can destroy us. Freedom is looking into a mirror and liking what we see, a person of integrity. Freedom is having no regrets. Freedom is knowing, yes - knowing that our sins are forgiven. Freedom begins at the foot of the cross and at the door of the empty tomb. That is the source of our freedom - real freedom. Never forget that.

St. Paul goes on in this great chapter from Galatians to list some of those characteristics of this kind of freedom. Hear them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Says Paul... those are the characteristics of those who are really connected up to Christ Jesus. And those are the characteristics of people who are genuinely free.

CLOSING

An American preacher by the name of Scott Brown visited in East Germany when the wall was still there. An East German pastor asked Scott Brown this question:

"Are the people in the West really free....?"

Puzzled a bit by the question, Scott asked an East German friend what the pastor meant. His friend replied:

"You see...knowing God is true freedom..." And then referring to his own land, the friend said to Scott, "We behind the Iron Curtain have very little hope of getting things....so often things are what come between God and His people...when you 'have' Jesus and nothing else.... and you know Jesus is all you need....then you are free, free indeed."

You and I are created for this kind of freedom. You and I need that kind of freedom. As you depart from here on this Independence Day weekend, carry along these thoughts:

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- Second: Freedom is responsibility...liberty is the luxury of self-discipline.
- Third: But even more importantly, freedom is rooted in the life and love of Christ.

Let us give thanks to God this day and this weekend for this free land in which we live. And let us also lay claim to that freedom that is our birthright in Christ remembering that when we are joined with Him, then we are truly free. Said Paul:

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore...and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery!"

PRAYER

For the freedoms we enjoy in this land, we give You our thanks, O God. As we celebrate this weekend, help us to grow in our understanding of what it entails and involves. Freedom has its roots in our religious faith. Help us to be tolerant in our use of it....to use it responsibly....for our hearts are restless until they find their perfect rest in You, O God...who has come to us in the life and love of Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.

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