

"FINDING REAL FREEDOM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 27, 1996**

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INTRODUCTION

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"Little Tommy will soon be learning that society places limits on a person's freedom....and it won't be long....."

FREEDOM FROM

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"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

What exactly did Jesus mean by that and what is freedom? Let's focus our attention on this today and admit right here at the beginning that for some people freedom means "freedom from..." Freedom from the federal government. Freedom from controlling parents. Freedom from traditional morality. Freedom from tyrannical bosses. Freedom from nagging spouses.

Remember Professor Henry Higgins in that wonderful play, My Fair Lady, and how he sang this line:

"I am an ordinary man who desires nothing more than just an ordinary chance to live exactly as I like and to do precisely what I want...."

We appreciate that sentiment and to many of us that's what freedom is all about. Many people want to do exactly as they like and precisely what they want. And if that means leaving behind some moral absolutes and some social responsibilities or even those they love, then so be it! People today want freedom from just about anything that would limit their personal desires. Maybe you're one of them and certainly this is not anything new.

The basic thrust of western civilization...all the way from the ancient Greeks down to the present day....can be summed up in a single phrase..."freedom from". Those of you who know your history know that the teachings of Copernicus and Galileo and Darwin freed many people from traditional faith forms and the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century by centering life in villages surrounding the great factories, "freed" people from those communities in which they had spent their entire lives. In this century, the slow erosion of traditional values is "freeing" people from the last social institution to which traditionally they have been tied...the family, of course. Ellen Goodman, who writes for the Boston Globe and whose columns I confess to reading and enjoying, calls us a "nation of leavers". She points out that...

"Our forefathers left Asia or Europe to emigrate to America....next as the frontier opened, they moved west until they came to the ocean and now, with no place to go, we are leaving each other...."

This kind of freedom is very popular and makes its appeal to many...freedom from anything that would limit our personal autonomy. Freedom from social constraints, freedom from crying kids, from the daily grind. Let me ask you: what would real freedom be for you? Is it primarily a freedom "from...." Think about it.

Admittedly, this "freedom from...." is not a bad thing. Our founding fathers and mothers came to this land to be free from political and religious oppression. And there's nothing wrong with that. Many churches across our land today are celebrating Reformation Sunday. You know all about that...remembering that time and that weekend back in 1517 when Martin Luther put into play some forces that "freed" many Christians from a church that had become rife with corruption. "Freedom from...." can be a necessary, a corrective measure, a noble pursuit.

The papers this summer carried a story about Chelsey Thomas, a girl who was born without the ability to grin. This California girl was born without the nerve that transmits commands to facial muscles and this caused the corners of her little mouth to sag. The condition which is called Moebius Syndrome afflicts about one person in a thousand in our country. This past year surgeons grafted muscles and nerves taken from Chelsey's leg to the facial muscles used for chewing and biting and now, with a little thought, this blond, blue-eyed little girl can now smile. Her mother remarked,

"The smile looks great...very natural, but she still has to work at it...not quite spontaneous yet, but perhaps in a year or so it will be.....I find myself asking her quite often to smile....just to see it....and now when somebody takes her picture, she does it without being asked...."

For Chelsey, freedom from this debilitating physical condition is indeed wonderful. "Freedom from...." is not necessarily bad. It can be positive, but for some people, in exercising this "freedom from...." they end up losing more freedom than they ever gain. Some people in exercising this kind of freedom discover not happiness, but isolation and emptiness and despair. It is a very complicated kind of freedom, so watch out. It can be tricky.

THE FREEDOM TO

But there is another kind of freedom and it comes across as a more exhilarating form of freedom. Let's call it "the freedom to....." For example, the freedom to be all that God created us to be.

Did any of you read about the four "Elvis Impersonators" who not too long ago were injured skydiving after some stiff winds blew them from their target at the grand opening of a waterfront nightclub up in Boston. Picture this, if you can....four stuntmen, complete with fringed jumpsuits, slicked back hair and dark sun-glasses...flying over a club in Quincy, Massachusetts...and then having to land in a cordoned off section of the parking lot of the glitzy night club. Well, instead....two of them splashed down in Boston Harbor, another fell into a nearby street and still another crashed at a fancy yacht club in Dorchester, just outside of Boston.

For some people, to jump out of an airplane and soar to the ground is freedom, no matter how crazy it all may seem to the rest of us. There is an element of "freedom from...." here. Freedom from the fear of falling, for example. Or, in terms of doing an Elvis impersonation in front of a live audience, freedom from the fear of looking foolish. As one cynic remarked,

"Of course, life is unfair. If life were fair, Elvis would still be alive and all those who try to impersonate him would be dead....."

But still...there is also an element of the "freedom to...." in this story. That wonderful freedom to soar like the eagle and not to walk like a turkey. The freedom to be free from our earth-bound nature, to go out and to attempt what few have had the nerve to attempt. Many find their fulfillment in life the freedom to be and to do more than the ordinary, the commonplace, the routine.

Think for a moment of our Olympic athletes....men and women who have conditioned and trained their bodies to respond in ways that they are able to run faster than people have ever run, or to leap higher than anyone has ever leaped before, and at the same time to show more physical grace and dignity than most of us can ever imagine. That's freedom. Most of us can tell our bodies to perform such feats and our bodies respond with

"What? Who me? You want me to do that? Why, you must be crazy....." Most of us are prisoners of and in our own bodies...sadly prisoners of years of neglect, abuse, lack of exercise and over-eating and drinking.

I think it's important that we see that this is not only true of athletes. People with advanced training and ability of any kind enjoy this same kind of freedom. Some people spend their entire lifetime in one job and can't change no matter how much they may desire to change because that is all they are trained to do. Others, on the other hand, have worked hard in school, paid the price, kept on growing after leaving school and they can choose from a great many jobs at a superior level of pay and so for the young people in today's congregation...let me say this.

Stay in school. Or, go as far in school as you are able to go. I believe it is still true that for most people, education and ability equal freedom. You may be tempted to think that leaving school gives you that "freedom from...." You know, from grouchy teachers and boring assignments and demanding homework. But education is actually the path to freedom. The more knowledge you have, the greater become the range of your choices and your opportunities.

"Freedom from...." and the "freedom to...." are sometimes in conflict. Sometimes we have to give up one freedom in order to gain a greater freedom. Athletes understand this. Musicians, too. Is there anything more boring than to spend hours practicing scales or whatever. But the greater freedom of being able to play a magnificent sonata is worth the price of temporary drudgery. Scientists understand this. Hours spent mastering chemistry and physics and math pay off in a freedom to do marvelous things in the laboratory.

Freedom to be all we can be may mean that we deny ourselves the opportunity to be free from tasks that we might find boring and unfulfilling.

To me, there's still truth...and a lot of it...in that observation made years ago by Harry Emerson Fosdick whose powerful voice and intellect and spirit graced the pulpit of Riverside Church here in the city. How did it go?

"A railway engine is made to run on tracks, and if it remains on the tracks it finds its freedom, pulls its load and gets to its destination. But if, in order to gain its freedom, it jumps the tracks, the result is not freedom, but ruin to itself and everybody concerned."

FREEDOM IN SPIRITUAL THINGS

And this brings us then to the third and the final thought for today's sermon. (My sermons usually have three points....you know that ahead of time....but that's all right....three more ideas than some sermons may have....)

Let me put it to you this way: there is a freedom in spiritual things that comes only with discipline and denial. And as I've said before....denial is not a river in Egypt.

How can we possibly think that it requires discipline and hard work in other worthwhile pursuits and arenas of life such as athletic and music and science and then think that we can enjoy the fruits of God's grace without a measure of devotion and sacrifice and yet - we do! Yes, to be sure....God accepts us just as we are and there is nothing we need to do to earn God's love. Luther and the great reformers fought that battle back in 1517....still, without a commitment to living a Christlike life and cultivating some "holy habits" along the way, we will never ever find the real joy of salvation.

Consider some questions: how much time do you spend each day in Bible study? Or, how much time each week? After all, the Bible is the foundation stone of everything we believe about life and God and the universe which is our home, and yet....we find it tough to squeeze out 15 minutes a day, or a week. Prayer and meditation on spiritual concerns. Do you ever give some time to reconnecting up with the ONE who is the source of life itself. Are you leading a disciplined life morally? Be honest in your answers. I could take this step or two further and ask whether you are truly supporting the church, the custodian of certain values with "your prayers, presence, gifts and service"?

I like something that Colin Campbell wrote in Leadership magazine:

"Wise person" he wrote, "have always recognized that freedom does not mean the absence of constraints or moral absolutes. Suppose a skydiver at 10,000 feet announces to the rest of the group, 'I'm not going to use a parachute this time...I want freedom!' The fact is that a skydiver is constrained by a greater law - the law of gravity. But when the sky-diver is constrained by a parachute, he or she is free to enjoy the exhilaration. God's moral laws act the same way....they restrain, but they are absolutely necessary to enjoy the exhilaration of real freedom."

I leave you with this thought. Have you discovered real freedom in your life? "You shall know the truth" said Jesus and "the truth shall set you free."

I believe that Christ, Himself, is the truth. And when we choose to live our life in Him, we discover....we find a higher freedom than the world can ever know. "He who has the ears to hear, let him hear."

PRAYER

Once again, we ask that we may each be sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where doubt, despair, denial, fear and guilt may be lurking. Grant us the gift of freedom to be all that You would have us be, dear Father. This we ask in the name of the Good Shepherd, Jesus, who knows His sheep by name and who gently brings them home to Himself. This we ask in the name and spirit of Him who is the truth, even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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