

## "THE SEARCH FOR PERSONAL FREEDOM"

### INTRODUCTION

Margaret Applegarth has written a stimulating little play called Never Quite the Same Again. In it she pictures Lazarus, after he has been raised from the dead by Jesus, talking with a reporter about how he feels about the experience. The reporter is amazed to learn that, as far as Lazarus is concerned, things at home look quite different now. He reports that he feels terribly confined, far more so than when he was wrapped in the tight burial windings which compressed his limbs and held him immobile. The life to which he has returned seems so constricting. He feels bound by the customs, the daily rituals of his people and feels a need to be untied from them, set free because he has no room to move.

Now I would like to use that image for a while here this morning and talk to you about the meaning and the search for personal freedom. The whole idea of freedom is shaking the foundations of the world, whether it is from new nations emerging from the narrow bands of colonialism, or minority groups confined in the ghettos literally demanding room to move. The issue of personal freedom is a problem for all of us, it's one that we have to struggle with, one that we face daily.

We face it in the family. Every parent is faced with the question of how much freedom to give his child. What will the parent decide and what will the child be permitted to decide. The problem becomes even more vocal as the child becomes a teen-ager for then it is that the young person really begins to challenge old reasons for doing things and more than often demands of his parents "the right to live now", to experience things for himself. The issue of freedom is a crucial issue in dating, in courtship, in the roles which the married couple work out with each other after marriage. Do we have the freedom to do anything we want. Are there restraints, limits, bounds, curbs by which we must live? There are several things I would say in dealing with this matter.

### NO FREEDOM WHEN YOU INSIST ON SOMEONE TELLING YOU WHAT TO DO

The first thing I would suggest is that you aren't free when you insist on somebody else telling you what to do. There are many people who fall into this category, who lean heavily on authority figures, who want to be told what to do, who don't want to have to carry the responsibility of having to make decisions. They have not grown up in the freedom that is theirs.

There are a great many of us who are like this, who want to be dependent more than they want to be free. The classic symbol for it in our time is Linus, the character in the Peanuts cartoons who clings to his happiness and security blanket. No matter what happens to him in life, he can get by if he can get his finger in his mouth and the warmth of the blanket pressed comfortably against his face. He is panicked and anxious when he is without it. When it is being laundered he hovers over the washing machine like an alcoholic waiting for his next drink and then relaxes into his familiar pose again. We are amused by Linus, but we cannot laugh too hard because we recognize so much of ourselves in him. There are many different kinds of security blankets on which we become dependent.

Some of us have become too dependent upon our parents. This is appropriate for the small child; he has to depend upon them. But not always for the adolescent, and not for the adult. We all know parents who have kept their children in this state long after they should have been out in the world on their own. Perhaps you saw the cartoon of the bride and groom standing at the altar to be married, and the groom's mother, standing near them, whispers slyly to her son, "Don't forget dear, tonight mother is having your favorite pot roast for supper made just the way you like it". We call this smoother love. And the victims of smoother love sometimes find it hard to be free enough to be responsible. There comes a time when parents need to cut the apron strings, and get the chicks out of the nest into the world.

There are others of us who find it easy to become dependent upon authorities whom we trust. For instance, a college girl wrote to the chaplain of her university, "When I go home for this vacation the old crowd will get together for a party. There will be lots of beer, the pairing off will result in several affairs, the people will wish they could forget and all in all, it will be a thing to be ashamed of for a long time. Write and tell me not to go". But nobody can write and tell her not to go; she has to tell herself. You have to learn to "tell yourself" if you are going to be responsible for your own life. Real growth occurs when one reaches the point of maturity where one can tell oneself what to do, rather than appealing as this girl did to her chaplain.

Another place where dependency shows is in relation to religious tradition. If you saw the Broadway play, Fiddler on the Roof, you recall the struggle of the father who is caught between the religious tradition of his people which has been the foundation of his life and the changing circumstances which cause the daughters he loves to turn their back on that tradition in their choice of husbands. The conflict is a very real one, and the struggle to resolve it very painful. In the father, we see the danger of trusting an authority which gives us all the answers but does not allow us room to move in new ways as new circumstances demand it.

It seems to me that one of the things that is happening in our world at the present time is that people are exactly in that position. They have been trained to be dependent upon religious beliefs and customs and practices which they accepted without much questioning or re-examination. Through creed and doctrine it has been solidified and re-inforced. They have been told to do this or do that. They have been told to believe in God, to have faith, to trust in God in every situation. God was the answer to everything.

But modern man is no longer inclined to accept his dependency upon God for the situations he cannot handle. There is more and more emphasis on man's own developing powers. It is important for us to understand that this does not diminish God at all. Alan Paton says that man's intellect seeking for God is like a search-light which he turns this way and that into the night sky, trying to illuminate what is there so it can be described. But, he says, we must not make the mistake of thinking that because we caught a glimpse that we have seen all that there is to see. Some people have assumed that God is dead because our ways of describing his action in the past are no longer meaningful to us today. The old symbols are not satisfactory. We need to seek and find new ways to describe the experience of God, in ways that are coherent with man's new knowledge of the universe, and we need to recognize that these ideas are never final, but always in the process of becoming. Our religious knowledge should be growing as our understanding of the universe grows, and this means that many of our old ideas and traditions and customs may change in the process.

#### NO FREEDOM WHEN YOU REMOVE ALL RESTRICTIONS

Now suppose we come at this matter of freedom from another angle. The second thing I would emphasize is that you're not free just because you remove all restrictions. Just as there are some people who suffer from the problem of being too dependent upon someone else to make their decisions for them, so there are others who for a variety of reasons, feel that their freedom, their room to move, is only possible if all restrictions of every kind are removed.

There is this kind of assumption, particularly among young people in rebellion today, that any kind of authority is evil, that the only way to real freedom is to be without external demands or disciplines of any kind. Many have grown up in atmospheres in which the words authority, discipline, obedience are considered to be nasty words. We have been encouraged to think that no discipline is the best kind. And one of the

major forms of expression of this train of thought in our time is existentialism. In its most extreme form, it places as its highest value the necessity for the individual to work out the meaning for his own life in any way he chooses through direct personal action. He is dependent upon no one and responsible to no one.

To many young people who have lived life hemmed in by adult standards, it is undoubtedly very exciting to think that the central thing in life is to choose for ourselves without restriction. I read recently that a professor was lecturing on the values of existentialism and his college class was eating it up when the news of President Kennedy's assassination interrupted the class. In the stunned silence that followed the news, one student's quiet voice jarred them all, "It was the perfect existential act". A young man had acted in perfect freedom, obedient to nothing outside himself. But this is not really freedom, for in our world the bounds of any man's freedom are always limited by having to take into account the freedoms of others.

It is Dr. Sockman, I believe, who has used the image of the sailboat to describe what happens when all authority is gone from our lives. He says all you have to do is to turn a sailboat out into the bay without any persons aboard to see what happens. If there is no one at the rudder to guide and no one to trim the sails what happens to the boat? It flounders about in the waves for a while and then capsizes. If it is going to stay afloat and move in any significant direction, there has to be a rudder and there has to be a tension in the sails, for it is only under that kind of discipline that the boat can sail as it was intended to.

This image has much to say to us. There are always disciplines and authorities. If they do not come from without ourselves, they must come from within. I know of no great athletes who can ignore or break the rules and disciplines by which they are able to produce. No one thinks he can get an education by refusing to study. I know of no great creative artists who can remain great without continuing to cultivate the discipline by which they maintain their art. There may be some persons who can be great in spite of their carelessness, but we always wonder how much greater they might have been had they disciplined themselves. Fosdick put it this way:

"No horse gets anywhere till he is harnessed. No steam or gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. No life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, disciplined."

We are passing through a time when the traditional values are taking a terrible beating particularly in the realm of morality. We need to be reminded - all of us - that we live in a moral universe where there are some restrictions built into the fabric of things. We need to remember that when people - young people and old people - attempt to seize freedom for themselves without any concern whether they violate the freedoms of others leads not to real freedom, but to a bondage that may destroy even the capacity they have. There are restrictions woven into the fabric of things. And these restrictions catch up with you when you try to ignore them. If you try to live a life of cheating, taking advantage of people, cutting all the corners you can, you will eventually run up against the demand that you must learn to be just and fair. If you attempt to live a life which is centered on yourself, taking an interest in nothing and in nobody outside yourself, you will find that you will eventually stub your toe on the requirement that you live in relationship with other people or die in a prison cell of your own making.

CONCLUSION      Go with me one more step in this search for personal freedom. I think the trouble with both the person who is dependent upon others and the person who will not allow others to have a part in his life is essentially the same. Neither are truly free. Both types are allowing others to control their lives. The

dependent person's life is controlled by what others tell him to think or to do. And on the other hand, the person who will listen to nobody blocks out even the good things which others have to offer him. So in a sense, both are at the mercy of others. However, we are free individuals and have room to move to the extent that we understand ourselves as unique persons. To the degree that we know who we are, what our origin is, what our lives mean - we know whether we will allow others to control us...as we need to sometimes, or whether we will resist....as we need to other times.

To understand ourselves as unique persons we have to find out who we are. The answer to this question of "who I am" and "what I mean" is not met by a simple description of the things one does or the space that one fills in the world. It goes much deeper. The psalmist who wrote the psalm that was read earlier in the service was raising the question "what is man" he said, "that thou art mindful of him"..... "for thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor". There we begin to get a glimpse of the answer, the sacredness of human personality. It is tied in with it. Neither real selfhood nor real freedom is possible - alone, apart from others. It is something I achieve as I intersect with others, and let part of their life move into mine and part of mine into theirs. Yet, I am always caught. How can I be free of them and yet responsible in my relationships to them. And how do I know that they won't attempt to dominate me or that they won't be trying to meet their own needs through me? I don't.

I dare to trust them because I already live in a relationship of trust with God. It is a triangular relationship, if you can picture it. God - your life - the life of others - all related. God has breathed the breath of life into you and into the next person, too. He sustains your life and also the life of the next person, too. He has given you the freedom to be what you are, and also given this gift to the next person, too. Our real freedom grows out of the fact of our relationship to God and to each other. Because of this relationship to God, one is never totally dependent upon what other people think, nor has one to reject what they think in order to satisfy one's own needs. Christianity promises to make men free. However, it never promised to make them independent of God.

I would leave you with something that Martin Luther once said as he wrestled with this whole question: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none" (There it is - the vertical relationship - one's relationship to God). But this is only half of his statement. The rest is this: "The Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone". (There is the horizontal relationship. One's relationship to others). Within this triangular relationship, one finds his freedom.

Prayer      As we direct our thoughts to the great problems of life, help us,  
O God, to think clearly and then lead us out of ourselves toward  
Him who is the purpose of all men and in whom we find our perfect freedom, that we  
may show forth in our lives in the days of the week to come something of his life,  
that our world through us may be reconciled to thee. Amen