

THE VAGARIES OF FREEDOM

June 27, 2010

Texts – Galatians 5: 1, 13-25
Luke 9: 51-56

Freedom. Is there anything we believe in more? “The cause of freedom is the cause of God,” one man (Samuel Bowles) says. “Those who deny freedom to others,” Abraham Lincoln wrote, “deserve it not for themselves and under a just God cannot long retain it.”

Freedom. It is the flesh and blood not only of our culture but of our religious heritage. “In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,” we sang a moment ago (the Battle Hymn of the Republic),

“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.”

Is anything more American, or more Christian?

Freedom. In a word it is what Jesus of Nazareth was about. His message was one of freedom – freedom from fear, freedom from the endless cycle of sin and guilt and condemnation, freedom even from judgment and death. “*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples;*” Jesus said, “*and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*” (John 8: 31-32; NRSV)

Paul rightly understood this message of freedom, but he also clearly saw and understood the enormous danger which goes hand in hand with it. “*For freedom Christ has set us free,*” he says in our text from the Letter to the Galatians.

*“Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery....
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.”* (5: 1, 13-15)

It's a remarkable passage. There is a "dark side" to freedom, Paul says. It can become "*an opportunity for self-indulgence.*" It can lead to enormous chaos – "*bite(ing) and devour(ing) one another,*" is the way he puts it.

Vaclav Havel, the former President of the Czech Republic, knows something about that. Three years after the collapse of communist totalitarianism, he authored a collection of essays entitled Summer Meditations. "The return of freedom to a society that was morally unhinged," Havel began,

"has produced something it clearly had to produce, and something we therefore might have expected, but which has turned out to be far more serious than anyone could have predicted: (namely) an enormous and dazzling explosion of every imaginable human vice. A wide range of questionable or at least morally ambiguous human tendencies, subtly encouraged over the years and, at the same time, subtly pressed to serve the daily operation of the totalitarian system, have suddenly been liberated, as it were, from their straitjacket and (have been) given freedom at last. The authoritarian regime imposed a certain order ... on these vices.... This order has now been shattered, but a new order that would limit rather than exploit these vices, an order based on freely accepted responsibility to and for the whole of society, has not yet been built – nor could it have been, for such an order takes years to develop and cultivate."

"Thus we are witnesses," he concluded,

"to a bizarre state of affairs: society has freed itself, true, but in some ways it behaves worse than when it was in chains. Criminality has grown rapidly But there are other, more serious and dangerous symptoms: hatred among nationalities, suspicion, racism, even signs of Fascism ... and a prevailing lack of tolerance, understanding, taste, moderation, and reason."¹

It was and is a fascinating book. Vaclav Havel described a dynamic which had not only his homeland in its grip twenty years ago, but seemingly all of the lands which were formerly a part of the Soviet Union. The old order fractured into countless pieces. “And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men,” as the nursery rhyme says, “cannot put Humpty Dumpty back together again.”

Freedom. It can be a dangerous commodity. It was two thousand years ago; it is so today. It is dangerous at the geo-political level. It is dangerous at the internal and personal level.

In our lesson from the Gospel of Luke we see that demonstrated quite explicitly. Refused an audience by a Samaritan village, the disciples wanted to utterly destroy it. “*Do you want us,*” they asked, “*to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*” *But he turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.’*” (Luke 9: 54-55; NSRV)

It seems incomprehensible that they could have been so wrong, so hard-hearted, so mean-spirited ... until, that is, you think about their past and their heritage. What they intended for that village, after all, was nothing more than what their scriptures told them had happened to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was no different from what Joshua and their ancestors had done to all the cities and villages of Canaan. Why should this little Samaritan village be any different? It makes perfect sense, though it is perfectly awful and evil.

“*You do not know what spirit you are of,*” Jesus said to them. But you see, it is the same spirit we are of also. It’s the human spirit ... and the human spirit, when given freedom, must take care that it does “*not use its freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.... (For) if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*”

Let me talk about this dynamic in a form that I have come to recognize over the years, both in myself and in others. I’ve seen it played out over and over. Perhaps you have as well.

You and I enjoy a measure of economic well being that is unthinkable and unimaginable for most people in the world. With it comes a measure of real freedom, but also of enormous challenge. There’s almost a stereotype to it. A couple starts out living very modestly. They’re young. They’re working hard. They’re trying to make it. They scrimp and they save. Their idea

of a vacation is a driving sortie to visit the in-laws. And then he gets a promotion, or she is offered a new position, and money is no longer a problem.

They're free! They've made it! And there's a new car and their first real vacation and a house of their own, or maybe a new house in a new neighborhood. You've seen the pattern same as I. And you know what happens so often next ... next there's not as much time as there used to be to talk or be together, and there's pressure to entertain and be entertained, and more than a little social drinking (I suppose that shows my age: I still think of the drug of choice as alcohol) ... and then they're seeing a therapist because "we aren't communicating too well" ... and then the kids get their own therapists ... and it spirals down and down and pretty soon we're into lawyers and divorce court.

We've seen it happen all too often, haven't we? It's not the money; it's the freedom the money brings.

"You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence," Paul says. *"Take care that you are not consumed by one another."* (5: 1,15) They are appropriate words for all of us as individuals, and they apply just as clearly to the country we love so well.

"O beautiful for spacious skies, For amber waves of grain," we shall sing in a few moments. "For purple mountain majesties Above the fruited plain! America! America! God shed his grace on thee, And crown they good with brotherhood From sea to shining sea." It's a hymn I love and long ago committed to memory. I love it for its invocation of the beautiful North American landscape I've been privileged to call home throughout my life. I love it for its recitation of the history we share as a people. But most of all, I love it for its open confession of the dangers inherent in freedom. "God mend thine every flaw," we shall sing; "Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law."

"Through love," scripture says, *"become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"* Katherine Lee Bates incorporated that teaching into our hymn, didn't she? It is "brotherhood From sea to shining sea" that we pray for in our singing, and hopefully in our living.

I've a wonderful little book entitled Inscape, which was written by Ross Snyder for persons about to enter a marriage relationship. He says, and I quote:

“So you are now leaving the home and world of your childhood – and of your teenage existence; You are migrating into a new world and a new life. Singing a new tune. A lifetime together will be all too short to explore its meanings. But some of these meanings we can point to... Each of you is now a *freedom* in a way that you never have been. The tie that binds is also your passport to the land of freedom. No one dwells in God's country until he has discovered to what he can be true – and with whom he can be true. So one name of your new country is *creative fidelity*.”²

Discover what you can be true to ... discover with whom you can be true. That is the key to freedom, Snyder says, whether it be in the land of our birth or in the homes of our hearts.

It is good advice, my friends, not only for those entering into marriage or for 1st century Galatian Christians, but for people of every age and of every land. Take care that your freedom does not become an opportunity for self-indulgence, but rather unfolds into a life of Spirit which is manifested in love.

- 1 . Vaclav Havel, Summer Meditations (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1992), pp. 1-2.
- 2 . Ross Snyder, Inscape (Abingdon Press, 1968), pp. 18-19.