

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on January 23, 2022.

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

For you were called to freedom, brethren only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love become servants of one another. Galatians 5:13-15

This past Monday there was a documentary on PBS celebrating the work of Martin Luther King Jr. This more recent documentary included interviews with people who had encountered him during his crusade for civil rights for all. One woman was a little girl when she met King outside a rally in Memphis. He told the children that whenever anyone asked them what they wanted, "Say Freedom."

Americans talk a lot about freedom, but what does freedom mean?

James McPherson authored one of the best books written about the Civil War. He entitled his book ***Battle Cry of Freedom***. McPherson believes that one way of understanding the Civil War and indeed all American history is as an attempt to define the nature of freedom. He begins his preface with these words:

Both sides in the American Civil War professed to be fighting for freedom. The South said Jefferson Davis in 1863 was "forced to take up arms to vindicate the political rights, the freedom, equality, and State sovereignty which were the heritage purchased by the blood of our revolutionary sires." But if the Confederacy succeeded in this endeavor, insisted Abraham Lincoln, it would destroy the Union "conceived in liberty."

Americans have struggled in every age to understand the meaning of freedom.

We use the term freedom not only in our national life. Individuals value their liberty. The elementary school student cannot wait for the last day of the school year so they can have their freedom. The eighteen-year-old young adult looks forward to moving out of their parents' home so they can have freedom. The unhappily married person looks forward to the day when the court gives them their freedom. The sixty-year old often speaks of his or her coming retirement as the day they become free.

Freedom is of great value to us, yet we understand it in many ways. All too often we understand it in negative terms. The Colonists understood freedom to mean the ending of British rule. The South understood freedom as keeping the north from telling them how to live. The teenager thinks of freedom as being out from under their parents' control.

In a book published several years ago, Notre Dame Professor Patrick Deneen makes the case that our society is failing because we have created a culture based on making an idol of freedom. He tells us that our stress on an individual's right to do whatever we want has undercut all the other important loyalties in life. He tells us that many of our important institutions such as family, religion, schools and tradition have been undermined by the ideology of personal freedom.

I believe he has an important point to make. Most Americans I think have been trained to instinctively believe that freedom is grounded in each person's will to do whatever they might want. Yet in reality what this really means is that each person is a slave to his or her own passions and desires. If a person is only accountable to what they feel, then their feelings rule them. I firmly believe that we must look to the Bible to understand the source and meaning of freedom.

Freedom is a central message of the Bible. God gives human beings the gift of freedom. Paul tells us **for you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.**

Today our core story from Exodus tells of the most important event in the whole Old Testament. It is the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The story of the deliverance from Egypt is the singular most important event in the life of the Hebrew people. It is the story of the gift of freedom.

Remember that the Hebrews had gone to Egypt at the time of Joseph. There had been a famine in Israel and so the people migrated to Egypt in search of food. They had settled down and made their home along the Nile. Then a revolution had taken place and a new dynasty took power in Egypt. This new government did not look kindly on the Hebrews. The Hebrews became enslaved and were forced to work on some of the great construction projects of the day. Rameses II was the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. He was one of the great builders of the ancient world. Great statues and buildings that he commissioned can still be seen in Egypt today.

All this great construction had a cost. Part of that cost was the suffering of the people of Israel as they were forced to take part in this dangerous and backbreaking work. Their life consisted of much drudgery and toil.

Then Moses appeared on the scene. Remember last week we heard how God called Moses at the burning bush to go to Egypt to free his people and lead them to the Promised Land. Moses did as he was told. Moses traveled to Egypt and challenged Pharaoh to let the people go. When Pharaoh refused, a number of plagues came upon the Egyptians until Pharaoh told the people they could go. The Hebrews packed their belongings quickly and headed out of Egypt. After a short period of time, Pharaoh changed his mind. He did not want to lose all these good workers. He sent a detachment of troops to force the people of Israel back to work.

Moses and his followers had reached the Red Sea when the forces of Pharaoh were about to overtake them. It looked like the hope of deliverance was all a hoax. The people were trapped between a river they could not cross and the troops that were rapidly closing in on them. It is at this time that the great and most important miracle of the Old Testament takes place. A great wind comes up and the waters of the sea part. The people and their belongings were able to get to the other side. After they had crossed the sea, the troops of Pharaoh tried to come after them, but the winds subsided and the waters return and drowned the Egyptians.

The people of Israel then make their way to Sinai where God makes a covenant with them and gives the Ten Commandments to shape their life together.

I believe this story illustrates the meaning of freedom. It tells us that freedom is a gift from God. Freedom, for the Hebrews, meant release from the power that held them in bondage. Freedom meant the chance to become the chosen people. Freedom is the power that God gives to us in order that we might become the people he intends for us to be.

The same message is found in our text for today. The power found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus frees us from all that binds us and makes it possible for us to begin to become the men and women that God wants us to be.

A modern day understanding of this Christian truth is found in the work of Alcoholics Anonymous. I believe that the first two steps of their twelve-step program apply to all of us.

The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is to admit that one is powerless over alcohol – that one's life has become unmanageable. This is another way of saying that one is in slavery to something that has control over you.

We may not be under bondage to substance abuse, yet we all are slaves to something in our lives. There is something that has power over us. It may not be drugs or alcohol, but it could be the love

of money or an attraction to some person, or an overwhelming need to feel appreciated, or the need to feel better than others, or maybe you are addicted to work, or maybe there is someone you hate and that hate controls you, maybe it is fear of failure or dread of death.

I could go on and on to list various things that control different people. Paul talks in the Epistles about the power of sin. There are things that have power over us. The natural state of people is that they are controlled by something. We are all held in bondage in some Egypt.

The first step in spiritual growth is to accept the truth that we are powerless over that which controls us. This means we each must confess that we have messed up our lives in some way. The prodigal son, so the story goes, came to his senses and realized that his life was in disarray. He had lost the ability to control his life.

The first step on the road to real freedom is to admit that we are not free. We must admit that there are things in our lives over which we have no control. We must confess that X, (you fill in the blank), has control over our lives. We are helpless to change for this destructive force enslaves us.

The second of the twelve steps of AA is to believe in a Power greater than ourselves which can restore us to sanity. I would put it this way; you and I are to turn to Jesus who has the power to free us from that which controls us. You and I do not have the ability to free ourselves from those things that bind our lives. Jesus has that power. Jesus through his death and resurrection has defeated the power of sin and death. He makes that power available to us.

Friends, the Good News of Jesus is not just that he rose from the dead two thousand years ago. The Good News is that he is present with us today. When we open our hearts and lives to him, the power of God's love flows into our hearts and minds and frees us from those evil chains which control our lives. This does not just happen in the course of events, we must ask Christ into our lives, we must seek his presence, we must trust in his promises.

So when Jesus frees us, it means that we can begin the journey towards becoming the people that God wants us to be. We still will make mistakes and sometimes fail, yet we are on a pilgrimage towards becoming whole Christians.

The message of freedom is clear. God, in Christ, frees us from all that enslaves us. This morning no matter what is holding you back, no matter what great concerns burden you, no matter what great sin makes you feel unworthy, no matter what passion seems to control, give it over to Jesus. Jesus has forgiven you, Jesus loves you, and Jesus wants to set you free from all those things that keep you from becoming the great person you can be.

Jesus has not given us freedom merely to do anything we might feel like doing. God has freed us from sin in order that we might serve Him. We can begin to grow in goodness and service. We can now use our freedom to do what God wants us to do. We are free to give our lives to Jesus more fully. God desires us to use our freedom for good.

The former chaplain of the United States Senate Peter Marshall tells us: **May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right.**

Freedom is not the chance to do whatever we might like, but rather to become the men and women that God wants us to be.

For you were called to freedom, brethren only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love become servants of one another.