

Exodus 14:10-18

Ambivalent about Freedom

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is Freedom. It is a concept most of us think about when we celebrate our national holidays like July 4<sup>th</sup> or Memorial Day. It is a political ideal which we hold dear. But freedom is something we think about all year long. It influences so many of our national debates today. Freedom is a cherished value. We debate what it means. We worry about who has it and who has lost it. Concerns about freedom shape most of our court cases, and legislation. Who should be allowed to marry whom is a question of personal freedom. Who carries a gun is a question of freedom? How we practice our religion is a question of freedom?

Concerns about freedom have shaped our history and even called for our sacrifices, sometimes the ultimate sacrifice. Our nation was born in a quest for freedom, and we fought the Revolutionary War of Independence to gain that freedom from taxation and colonization. Then during the Civil War our nation tore itself to shreds over the cause of freedom for American slaves. When soldiers fought in World War II they went to protect this nation's freedom and to ensure that it would not be in jeopardy as the German army, under a Nazi dictator, took over Europe and threatened most of the world. It was a particular problem because the Nazis usurped the freedom of the people they conquered.

We all make some assumptions about our rights to be free. I spent some time with my grandson last week and he has his ideas about what he wants, so I tried to accommodate his newfound and cherished freedoms as he learns to walk further, run faster and speak more. When he did not get what he wanted he was frustrated. Freedom is new for him but it clearly energizes him to use his spoon to feed himself and to run around the house unhindered and decide what to do at the playground. "My turn grandma; I do self."

When we raise small children we try to protect them but also allow them to learn how to use their freedom safely. If we did not cherish this freedom they are growing into, we would simply restrict them completely. When we have teenagers the whole role of the parents is to teach them how to be free of us. If we did not expect that they would fly on their own wings we'd train them to stay home, as people do in many other cultures. When we choose friends or life partners we consider how to negotiate these relationships so that we can maintain some freedom to pursue our dreams, acknowledging that we are giving up some independence in order to have a relationship at all. Many of us choose one job over another because it allows us the freedom to be creative with our talents or play to our strengths. Senior citizens worry about our freedom all the time. Folks worry a lot about how long can we drive, live alone or make our own decisions? Even in retirement communities folks realize the importance of freedom, so they label sections of housing "Independent" Living, which is a marketing concept, because we all know that you really give up a lot of freedom when you move into independent living. But all life long, we negotiate what it means to be free.

The Bible believes in freedom. When God created Adam and Eve they dwelled in the Garden of Eden. While it was a lovely spot, and they had the run of the place, there were many limits to their freedom. God told them they were free to explore but they could not eat from one tree. When I imagine the Garden of Eden I wonder if it was like living in an elaborate well-stocked playpen. Before long Adam and Eve out-grew the confines of the garden and God set them free. While it was a punishment to be sure to have to fend for themselves, it was also a chance to explore the world unfettered. The rest of the Bible deals with freedom in one way or another starting with one of the oldest stories in Hebrew literature, the one we read today about the Exodus. Let's take a look at what this story has to tell us today.

In the first place, Freedom is a journey. It is not a destination or a state you achieve. The longest sustained story in the Old Testament is the story of the Exodus. The steps of that journey are recounted in detail. The Bible might just say the slaves were freed by Moses, and once they crossed the Red Sea eventually they settled in a new land. But instead we hear about all about dilemmas and detours of this forty year journey. It is strange that it took so long because in those days the trail was well known from Egypt to Israel and caravan routes had existed for centuries. Yet the Hebrews got

lost and seemed stuck for decades. Bible scholars say that the only explanation for their lack of progress is that they were learning how to be free.

From the first exhilarating moment of relief as they headed out of town, they began to see how ill-equipped they were for freedom. Formerly as slaves they have very few decisions that they could make independently. Suddenly once they were free, they needed to make all their own decisions. They often worried that they might die in pursuit of this elusive freedom. They had to learn to find food, and to decide how to take responsibility for their survival. Part of the punishment for Adam and Eve is that no one would save them if they did not make it now, they were on their own. It was both exhilarating and scary. Growing up is a long process of learning to be independent.

When the Founding Fathers dreamed of a social order where people would be guaranteed certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, those rights were at first only extended to white men of a certain upper class of landowners. Though revolutionary as a concept, it took time for the scope of freedom to extend to working class men, then to Black men, and then to women. The whole idea of creating a nation based on principles of freedom has been to be refined and re-defined over more than 250 years. That is the work of the Supreme Court this week define freedom now for gay couples- a whole category of folks that none of the Founding Fathers might have imagined in their wildest dreams. Freedom is a process.

In the second place, freedom is hard work. It requires vigilance, and thoughtfulness. When the people crossed the Red Sea they were jubilant. But before long, bitter competition broke out among the travelers. Even though they had nothing much but the clothes on their backs and what they could carry, petty rivalries dogged their tracks, and people coveted one another's belongings and stole from each other's tents. Before long Moses went to God to ask for help. That is when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Freedom does not come naturally. You have to learn the rules of engagement or else you have anarchy. Freedom requires discipline and integrity, honesty and high standards. It is something we all have to work at every day.

In the last days of the Civil War, the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia, fell to the Union army. Abraham Lincoln insisted on visiting the city. Even though no one knew he was coming, slaves

recognized him immediately and thronged around him. He had liberated them through the Emancipation Proclamation, and now Lincoln's army had set them free. According to Admiral David Porter, an eyewitness, Lincoln spoke to the throng around him: "My poor friends, you are free – free as air. You can cast off the name of slave and trample upon it ... . Liberty is your birthright." But Lincoln also warned them not to abuse their freedom. "Let the world see that you merit [your freedom]," Lincoln said, "Don't let your joy carry you into excesses. Learn the laws and obey them."

Finally, we are all responsible for freedom. The question I always want to ask is how did the Hebrews lose their freedom? What happened in Egypt to turn successful and well-connected Hebrew families into slaves? The Bible says that Joseph and his brothers moved to Egypt during a famine 200 years before the Exodus. But Joseph predicted the famine and became a powerful administrator who was indispensable to the Pharaoh. So what happened that cost them all that power and prestige? Somehow year by year the people lost their freedom bit by bit, inch by inch, little by little. Injustice happens but we downplay it or ignore it. We don't want to make a fuss. We start to believe it is not our problem.

Pastor Martin Niemoller spoke about the church's culpability in Germany during the rise of Nazism. He wrote in 1933 " the first people that they put into concentration camps were communists and it was in the news but we told ourselves they were opponents of religion, and people asked 'should I be my brother's keeper?'. Then they got rid of the incurables. I remember a conversation I had with a person who claimed to be a Christian. He said: 'Perhaps it's right, these incurably sick people just cost the state money; they are just a burden to themselves and to others.' Can we say, we aren't guilty/responsible? The persecution of the **Jews**, the way we treated the **occupied countries**, or the things in Greece, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia or in Holland were written in the newspapers. I believe we Christians have every reason to say: mea culpa, mea culpa! But we can talk ourselves out of it with the excuse that it would have cost me my head if I had spoken out." Freedom depends on us.

Long ago the first Christians developed communities of faith where everyone was free to come to the same table. It was a radical notion to have slaves eat with their masters, Greeks share food with Jews, men and women sitting down to eat as equals. It was unheard of. These gatherings were so

unconventional that the Romans outlawed them. We have forgotten how edgy they truly were. But no one is a slave at the Lord's Table. No one is an outcast. No one is beneath you or above you. Everyone who gathers here is on equal footing, as a child of God. When we partake in this meal today let us re-dedicate ourselves to this vision of a world where we all feel responsible for the freedom of the slave, or the welfare of the least among us. Let us remember that our host at this table sacrificed everything for this dream of God's kingdom here on earth. But the only ones who will make that happen are you and me.