

"THE MEANING OF FREEDOM"

Text: Genesis 1:26-31

A Series of Four Sermons

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by

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I

One of the most exciting words in our language is the word Freedom. Defining that word is harder than saying it, and living it is an even greater challenge. The concept of freedom appears very early in the Old Testament; in fact, in the very first chapter of Genesis.

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' And God said, 'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day." Genesis 1:26-31

Freedom is portrayed in this text in a remarkably subtle way. Man, who is made by God within the sixth day of creation, is granted by God genuine authority over the created order that surrounds him. Man, alone, in creation possesses this unique authority and choice. He names all of animals, every living thing, etc., with this privilege, this real authority - and implied in it is the beginning of science because all science originated in classification - is an inescapable responsibility: Man will have to abide by the names that he chooses and the choices of man, once they are made, will be very difficult to undo, even if they were carelessly decided.

A second observation is this. The authority of man is sweeping and extensive, but with one limitation. Man and his choices belong to the sixth day of creation, the day which has an ending. Man does not dwell in this life in the seventh day--the day without ending. Humanity and all of its powers are mortal.

This one boundary remains fixed and from the very beginning we, the human species, have consistently resented this one limitation. We have eaten apples, listened to snakes, engineered proud towers, announced one thousand year empires, all in various attempts to force our way into immortality, but the boundary has remained. Only God himself can extend our choices beyond the limit of the sixth day, beyond our mortality.

"We start talking of the Grace of God, when we ascribe more to man than from dust thou didst come, to dust thou shall return." Karl Barth.

Freedom may be defined as the privilege and the responsibility of authentic choices: The "may" vs. "must" in the journey of daily living - that is freedom.

Freedom is both a gift and a right. It is a right given by God in that from the very primitive beginning in Genesis I throughout the Bible, the right to the honest choice belongs to being truly human, and a man is not whole in the Biblical sense without this right. Therefore, to lose our freedom is an overwhelming tragedy of life. At this very basic level, we can see the theology of human freedom in the Biblical perspective and, therefore, why Christian faith is and must be committed to the expansion of this privilege to all men. We see it as an essential prerequisite for humanness.

The big question then is this - how can a man lose this priceless gift and legacy? As I see it, there are two ways: (1) Through external pressures, (2) because of inward pressures. Consider first of all the outward squeeze upon freedom:

There are three classic pressures that endanger our freedom from outside ourselves, and many people and societies of people have to a greater or lesser extent compromised the gift of freedom because of these pressures.

The first outward pressure is the most obvious and for that reason the least dangerous to our dignity. It is the attempt of an individual, group or governmental entity to control human freedom because of the fear of it. A few days ago a group of young Russian writers staged a demonstration on Red Square in Moscow against the policies of their government in Czechoslovakia. The demonstrators were arrested and in a speedy trial were sentenced to three years of labor for obstructing traffic on Red Square. One writer is reported to have said at the hearing:

"I am willing to pay three years in Siberia for the three minutes of freedom I experienced on Red Square."

The forceful moves of an outward group to curtail human freedom in the minds and hearts of other people do less harm to human dignity than one would suspect at first glance. This is true because freedom has been honored and even reinforced as a value of profound worth, and, therefore, many men, though imprisoned physically, have been liberated intellectually, spiritually, morally, oddly enough by the very fact of the imprisonment. In their case the physical curtailment and squeeze upon freedom results in the clarification of what freedom really is.

Prison is an obvious example of this first force of outward pressure upon freedom. The imprisoned person is deprived of authority, choices and in many

instances, because of the degrading context of prison life, he may be stripped of dignity and humanness. But, it is still true that this form of outward pressure upon freedom does less harm to the soul, because if I am imprisoned, whether because of politics or crime, I know why, and this knowledge preserves hope and keeps freedom alive as an option. The Russian writer knows the reason for his three year imprisonment and though that knowledge is painful and builds up within his heart deep feelings of resentment, nevertheless, the air is clear. Take a different example, a young man caught in the act of robbery or assault is arrested and convicted of the crime and sentenced to three years in prison. He too has lost the privilege of authority and choices because society fears his use of freedom. He knows why his freedom has been radically reduced and as with the other instance, this knowledge preserves the real meaning and worth of freedom for him.

What I am saying is this: - By itself and not complicated by other outward pressures or inward confusion, the external, forceable attack upon the right to authority and choice among men by other men is the most obvious foe to our liberty, but not the most dangerous.

There is another outward pressure upon freedom that is not as obvious but is more destructive than the first. It is the exchange of our freedom for another value. It is an exchange, or rather a theft, of the right to freedom on the promise of another gift. That other gift offered in place of freedom usually is happiness. This second outward pressure is subtle; an individual, group or society as a whole, in order to make us happy, shields us from responsibility, from genuine choices, from authority to stand in our own shoes and finally, as the end result, we are shielded from ourselves, from our neighbors, from God, by someone else who now makes the choices and we luxuriate in a happy, uncomplicated resort atmosphere.

Who would do this to us? The list is very disconcerting because on it are many people and institutions that only want to make us happy and really mean no harm, but the harm they do is widespread. It may be a parent who is determined that "my son is going to have all of the advantages...." and to ensure these happy advantages, the youth is set into a kind of happiness prison. It may even be the church. Dostoevski's Grand Inquisitor says to Christ:

"Why have you come to disturb us?.....You don't know man.....you made him free when he wanted to be happy. We have made him happy. Now leave us alone...."

Most modern political dictatorships have controlled freedom by the second pressure rather than the first so that the smoothest control of freedom is to smother it by an indulgent happiness. I'll give you a terrifying example. One of the most brutal and callous events of modern history took place in the highly organized, systematic destruction of Jewish property in Germany on the night of November 10, 1938. 815 shops were destroyed, 119 synagogues set on fire, 20,000 Jewish citizens were arrested. The destruction in broken glass alone amounted to \$1,250,000. Wm. L. Shirer in his book, Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, tells of this beginning of the terrible plan of Adolf Hitler to destroy the Jewish people. On November 12, 1938, a meeting was held between insurance company executives and the Chief of Economic Affairs, Field Marshal Goering. The problem was the whole matter of insurance payments to the Jewish property owners who were in almost all instances covered by casualty insurance.

On the basis of a discovered stenographic record, Shirer tells it as follows:

"This problem was quickly solved by Goering. The insurance companies would pay the Jews in full, but the sums would be confiscated by the State and the insurers reimbursed for a part of their losses. This did not satisfy Herr Hilgard, who, judging by the record of the meeting, must have felt that he had fallen in with a bunch of lunatics.

"Goering: The Jew shall get the refund from the insurance company but the refund will be confiscated. There will remain some profit for the insurance companies, since they won't have to make good for all the damage. Herr Hilgard, you may consider yourself damned lucky.

"Hilgard: I have no reason to. The fact that we won't have to pay for all the damage you call a profit!

"The Field Marshal was not accustomed to such talk and he quickly squelched the bewildered businessman.

"Goering: Just a moment! If you are legally bound to pay five millions and all of a sudden an angel in my somewhat corpulent shape appears before you and tells you that you keep one million, for heaven's sake isn't that a profit? I should like to go fifty-fifty with you, or whatever you call it. I have only to look at you. Your whole body seethes with satisfaction. You are getting a big rake-off!

"The insurance executive was slow to see the point.

"Hilgard: All the insurance companies are the losers. That is so and remains so. Nobody can tell me differently.

"Goering: Then why don't you take care of it that a few windows less are being smashed!

"The Field Marshal had had enough of this commercial-minded man. Herr Hilgard was dismissed, disappearing into the limbo of history."

The point is obvious. In the ironic final score of history, all of those who exchanged the costly privilege and responsibility of freedom for the ease of provided security finally crumbled because of the bad substitution.

Another outward pressure is even more subtle than the second and offers an even more deceptive exchange. In this case, authentic freedom is replaced by a certain specially defined sort or type of freedom. "Freedom" is used to destroy freedom. The second pressure is bourgeois and by now because of the Freudian interpretation of interpersonal relationship, modern man tends to be on edge toward the promise of happiness and is less likely to welcome the change of freedom for indulgent gifts, at least over the long pull.

But the third pressure upon human freedom is contemporary and now very much in style. It offers to the individual or group a course of action which resembles freedom and is called by the name - but is not freedom. I once knew a couple who prided themselves on their modern liberal outlook in all questions; and, as it turned out, their two sons took the brunt of that outlook. The

They were normal in all ways except for a terrible exchange that was being mercilessly forced upon them. They were being compelled to adopt a brand of freedom that their mother was sure they needed. This style of freedom was, in fact, a kind of enforced carefreeness. Whatever whim or flash of impulse seemed to emerge was given instant encouragement and was proudly honored by the mother. The family was wealthy and this fact increased the range of possibilities for the two sons to dream dreams and express themselves. This mother's brand of freedom was very high on authority and choice and low on responsibility and obligation. Their life was unnatural and like a long, depressing stay in a progressive classroom where windows can be broken at will but where someone else cleans up the debris. I have often wondered about what happened to those two sons who had lost their freedom to "freedom." Fortunately for humanity false freedoms have a short staying power.

The third pressure poses a serious problem for our generation because it uses the very word freedom and liberty though the result is the inevitable erosion of these weighty values. The college that gives university coeds contraceptive pills as a means of insuring freedom from unwanted pregnancy is guilty of the exchange swindle where a very narrowly defined freedom is provided which undermines the full, healthy responsibility ingredient that is at the heart of authentic freedom. The tragedy of the third pressure is that the new freedom which is substituted does not have within it the power that full, uninhibited, authentic freedom does, and so the result is emotionally stunted people who are sold on a very meager gain with a glorious title.

Real freedom is not narcissistic, self-indulgent, but in a very profound sense, it is the deciding, crucial ingredient in faith, hope and love. Such a power as this cannot be taken lightly.