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Genesis 47:13-23
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THE BEST KIND OF GOVERNMENT

"Behold, I have bought you this day . . ."
Genesis 47:23

There are a few acres of land not far from here which mean a great deal to me. Because of the nature of my profession, those few wooded acres with a little stream running through them, and on which is a small white house, are the first real estate I ever owned.

The day after I had bought those acres I drove out from my home and walked over every foot of my "country estate". As I did so I found myself repeating the words, "This land is mine, this land is mine." To own a piece of land, to have proprietorship in those few acres, gave to me a sense of well being and security which somehow or other I had never known before. Even though I realize that our ultimate security ought never to be in things, the ownership of that piece of land gave me a real satisfaction and a new appreciation of and love for this grand and glorious country called the United States of America where a man can still enjoy the privileges of private property.

Soon after I had acquired my little piece of earth, I installed a flagpole because I wanted to see my country's flag, which I unashamedly admit to loving and honoring, flying over my acreage. At the base of the flagpole I placed in the concrete a small bronze plaque. On it are two nouns joined by a conjunction. The two nouns are word symbols representing God's two greatest gifts to man. They are, "Faith and Freedom".

It would be a wonderful thing if every family in America could own a piece of the soil. It does do something to a person. Jefferson knew it, and no doubt that is why he advocated that only land owners should be able to vote in the new country which he was helping to establish. One somehow or other has a greater love for his country and a greater interest in its welfare when he owns a piece of it which he can call his.

There are some strange things happening in our country today which I doubt would be happening if more of our citizens felt that they owned this land in which they live. One of these strange and different things is a black power advocate shouting,

"I will not go to Vietnam. I will not serve in the army. I will say, 'Hell, no'. . . I will go to jail. To hell with this country."

This is indeed a strange thing to be happening in America, but it is only one of many strange things that are happening. It is strange to see an unthinking mob of New York beatniks publicly burning the American flag.

It is strange to see college students demanding that the institutions which they are privileged to attend be run by themselves, instead of the administrative and faculty officials who have been charged with that responsibility.

It is strange to see American streets which are unsafe for honest citizens, and court decisions which protect the criminal more than the criminal's victim.

It is strange to see a national policy which fights communism 10,000 miles away but permits it to flourish 90 miles away.

II

On this Sunday closest to Independence Day it is appropriate to remember the words and lives of some of those men who made this country possible, and to reflect on our national heritage.

In a time when some theologians are saying, "God is dead", it is refreshing to recall that the Mayflower Compact, that document which was the first in all recorded history to be signed by those it was meant to govern, mentions the deity five times in its three short paragraphs. Certainly these were men and women of faith, in search of freedom.

It is thrilling to read the concluding words of the Declaration of Independence and reflect on the character and the conviction of those men who wrote there:

"With firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor."

It is good to remember General George Washington praying at Valley Forge, and Abraham Lincoln saying in his Gettysburg Address:

"That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

Yes, it is indeed strange, that the religious faith which helped establish America and gave strength and courage to its founders is more and more being outlawed in the land.

Faith and freedom are interdependent and always belong together. As a nation during the last several decades we have lost much of our traditional faith in God. Along with it has gone much of our traditional freedom. Now we look more to the state than to God, and with each increasing glance in that direction we chip away a bit of our free heritage. To look to the state always increases the power of the state, and a concentration of power is what always precedes the destruction of liberty.

III

Let me illustrate that last point--a concentration of power is what always precedes the destruction of liberty. The illustration is at least 3000 years old.

I need but refer to the passage of scripture contained in the 47th chapter of the book of Genesis. In that book we read how the father and brothers of Joseph left the land of Canaan and went to Egypt because there was a scarcity of food. They settled in the land with the Pharaoh's blessing. Joseph, the younger brother, was the Pharaoh's prime minister, but he was still under the domination and rule of the Pharaoh. As time went on, the famine which had covered the land of Canaan spread into Egypt. Joseph had foreseen it in the Pharaoh's dream which he had interpreted. Joseph proceeded to store great quantities of food during a seven year period in preparation for the seven years of famine that were to come. It was the people's food; it belonged to them. It was gathered by the government into vast warehouses and kept there in preparation for the future.

When the famine came, however, the food was not given back to the people; it was sold to the people. Finally when the people had no more money with which to buy the food, the Pharaoh said to them, "You don't need money, just bring me your cattle." So the people brought their cattle, their herds, their oxen and asses, and gave those to the Pharaoh in exchange for food. The following year when the famine still continued and they had no money and no cattle, the Pharaoh said, "You will not need money and you will not need cattle. Just give me your land, and I will give you food in exchange for that." The hungry people gave their land to the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh gave them food, their food which they had produced and given to the Pharaoh in order to prepare for this very emergency.

The following year the famine still continued. The people now had no money, they had no cattle, they had no land. So they went once more to the Pharaoh and you can read what Joseph, speaking for the Pharaoh, told them by turning to the 23rd verse of the 47th chapter of Genesis:

"Behold, I have bought you this day, and your land, for the Pharaoh."

The food which the Pharaoh had taken from the people represented power over the people, and a concentration of power, in that instance as in every instance, preceded the destruction of freedom. The Pharaoh had bought the people, they were now his slaves.

James Madison, one of the founding fathers, knew and understood this truth, and he one day said:

"There are more instances of the abridgment of freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachment of those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations."

Men, if they want to remain free must have faith in God and faith in themselves. Once they lose faith in themselves and faith in God and turn to some other source for the things which are necessary to life, they have begun to sacrifice their freedom and have taken the first step toward slavery.

IV

There are many, many people in our society today who speak and act as if they hated the heritage which is ours as Americans. They are the kind of people I cited at the beginning of this sermon--they can think only of how evil America is.

America is not perfect because Americans are not perfect. This country has done some things for which all of us are ashamed. But this is the freest, the grandest, the most glorious nation that the human race has ever known. Rather than decry it, and berate it, and condemn it, we need to try to make it even better, to correct its faults, but not at the price of sacrificing the freedom which has made it the greatest nation of all history.

Eric Hoffer, the part-time longshoreman and philosopher, has characterized some of the people who are America's worse critics:

"The attitude of the intellectual community toward America is shaped not by the creative few but by the many who for one reason or another cannot transmute their dissatisfaction into a creative impulse, and cannot acquire a sense of uniqueness and of growth by developing and expressing their capacities and talents. There is nothing in contemporary America that can cure or alleviate their chronic frustration.

"Even if we should banish poverty from the land, lift up the Negro to true equality, withdraw from Vietnam and give half of the national income as foreign aid they will still see America as an air-conditioned nightmare unfit for them to live in."

Which leads us to the title of this sermon, "The Best Kind of Government". The best kind of government is always, of course, self government, but if men and women cannot or will not be self-governing in their desires, their passions, their greed, then they will always be governed by others. The less self government there is, the more imposed government there will be. If each one of us cannot be a self-governing, self-reliant, independent, honest person of good character, then we invite some external force to take over our life and to govern it for us.

The whole history of the loss of human liberty is the history of men and women who will not govern themselves properly and adequately. When things get difficult, when they suffer the consequences of their

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own lack of self-government; they cry out to someone (ultimately the government), "Here is our land, here is our cattle, here is our money. Come, give us food, and we will be your slaves."

We live in a world where, as always, there is opportunity and challenge, but in order to meet the opportunity and the challenge, we must remain free. With a firm reliance on Almighty God and with deep conviction that our heritage of freedom and individualism is a blessing bestowed upon us by Almighty God, we will be able to write another chapter in man's continuing struggle for meaning and fulfillment, and succeeding generations will rise up and call us blessed.