

November 19, 1967
Romans 6:12-18
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FREEDOM'S A HARD BOUGHT THING

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ
hath made us free."

--Galatians 5:1

Stephen Vincent Benet was one of the finest poets and authors to be produced by the United States in the 20th century. From one of his short stories I have borrowed the title of today's sermon.

The story deals with a young negro slave who, like his grandfather before him, had a great compulsion to be free. When he was still a very young man he went one day to see the aged crone and conjurer, Aunt Rachel, to ask her what it was within him that made him so unhappy and dissatisfied.

"It's a sickness in your blood," said Aunt Rachel. "It's a sickness in your liver and your veins. It's the freedom sickness, son Cue."

"Oh, God, I want to be free," said Cue. "I just ache and hone to be free. How am I going to be free, Aunt Rachel?"

Aunt Rachel proceeded to tell Cue about the underground railroad which finally led him to the freedom which he had longed for so desperately.

II

Freedom is a hard bought thing. It can be said with a great measure of justification that the entire social history of mankind is the story of the struggle for freedom--physical, political, economic and religious freedom.

Perhaps few of those present this morning may know that the Sunday closest to the 11th of November has for many years been designated Forefathers Sunday in the Congregational churches in recognition of the brave and courageous struggle for religious freedom waged by our Pilgrim ancestors. November 11th marks the day on which they signed the Mayflower Compact.

One of the shrines of Congregationalism is in Nottinghamshire, England, Scrooby Manor House. There it was that a small group of persons known as non-conformists, met regularly, but always dangerously. Their meetings were contrary to law and they were subject to imprisonment, exile or even death. Indeed, a number of early non-conformists did languish and die in prison. Many of these non-conformists were later to become Congregationalists.

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Some of these people, imbued with a love for God and for freedom under God, finally, in desperation, deserted their homeland, which they dearly loved, and migrated to Holland. There conditions were extremely difficult, but at that time Holland was the only country in all of Europe where they could enjoy religious freedom.

Seeking a land of freedom and greater opportunity, they finally braved an even more arduous adventure and set sail on the Mayflower for America--102 persons, storm tossed, imperiled, uncomfortable beyond description, at sea for more than two months. One-half their number died during the first winter on that cold and desolate shore of Massachusetts. But when spring came and with it an opportunity to return to England, not one of them would leave.

Here is a question for every American to ponder 350 years later: Do you love God, or anything, enough to endure that kind of suffering? Do you believe in anything, have you faith in anything, so strongly held that you would do what those Pilgrim fathers did? It is doubtful that there are more than a handful of Americans who could honestly answer that question in the affirmative. In a few moments I will endeavor to tell you why.

III

There are people in our world today, however, who have proved themselves to be worthy of so great a human heritage. Many of them once lived behind the iron curtain. They willingly risked everything and forsook every possession just to obtain a little bit of freedom--that blessing which is so difficult to win when one does not possess it, and so easy to lose when one does not exercise eternal vigilance on its behalf.

It is sad indeed that so many men and women who enjoy the blessings of freedom have so little sympathy and understanding with those who lack this great gift of God. I have just been reading the letters of Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, a Lutheran clergyman of Rumania, who was a prisoner of the communists for 14 years. When he was finally released through negotiations by the Norwegians for a sum of \$7000, he sought to inform religious leaders of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of the true state of affairs behind the iron curtain concerning communism and religion, sought to obtain their aid for the underground church and for the members of the Christian community in communist dominated countries. But the officials of these church groups have refused to listen, so intent are they on seeking to build bridges of understanding between the western world and atheistic, materialistic communism.

No greater evil than communism has ever infected the earth. It is impossible for communism and Christianity to co-exist. Yet many western church leaders who have been contacted by Pastor Wurmbbrand have met him not only with indifference but even enmity. Writes Pastor Wurmbbrand:

"Never has any member of the underground church who has escaped to the West been received in Geneva (headquarters of the World Council of Churches). Never have they been invited to say what they have to say. There are church leaders who do their utmost to hide the tortures inflicted by communists on Christians."

Pastor Wurmbbrand is not a crackpot who speaks only for himself. Within the week Archbishop Iakovos, primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America, has revealed that in all of Russia the Orthodox Church is permitted only three theological seminaries and admission is strictly controlled by the state. The one Jewish seminary in Russia has no students, and there are less than a dozen rabbis in Russia, all of them over 60 years of age. No Bibles may be published in Russia. No YMCA, Sunday school or free religious press is permitted. Thousands of religious leaders have been executed, yet the passion for religious freedom does live on in many Russians, as it did in the minds and hearts of our spiritual forefathers, the Pilgrims. Freedom's a hard bought thing indeed, but there are always some who will give up all else in order to possess it. Would you?

IV

One of the greatest advocates of religious freedom this country ever produced was Roger Williams. Would that we might claim him as a Congregationalist, but unfortunately we cannot. The Congregationalists wanted religious freedom for themselves; they were not overly concerned about securing it for others. But at least they deceived no one.

On the other hand, Roger Williams wanted freedom for all. He claimed that no New England government had any authority, because they all got their land from King Charles who could not give it to anyone because he himself had never owned it. He got it by conquest. When Roger Williams founded Provincetown, Rhode Island, he scrupulously purchased the land from the Indians, and in the area of his influence, no magistrate could punish a man for religious violations. He far outdid the Puritans in his passion for freedom and ought to be considered one of America's great heroes.

A history of religion is in no small degree a history of persecution. I must say I relish the story of that leading Baptist speaker who once stood before a throng of dedicated Baptists and proclaimed:

"One thing you can say about the Baptists, they have never persecuted anyone because of their religious beliefs. . ."

When the applause died down he finished his sentence:

". . . because they have never been strong enough!"

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It is dogmatism combined with centralized power and control which leads otherwise decent people to condemn and persecute those with whom they do not agree. Those who believe in and cherish freedom must ever stand ready to be persecuted, to struggle and to be eternally vigilant in the safeguarding of this country's constitutional guaranty of freedom of worship. Freedom is a fragile and a beautiful thing, and like all beautiful and fragile objects, it is easily destroyed.

V

Now, of course, freedom of religion will mean little to those whose faith is not strong, or for whom God is not real. That is why the defenders of religious freedom are usually so few. The majority of Christians today have a kind of spoon-fed, hand-me-down religious faith that came to them with about as little real thought and effort as their political opinions. As a result, they have no great passion for it.

I spoke to our high school young people last week about their choice of a life philosophy. Perhaps I shocked some of them by denying that many of them had actually chosen the Christian philosophy as their philosophy of life. A philosophy or faith does not become yours just because you have read something about it, attended a class where it was spoken of, grew up in a family where it was the accepted thing. A philosophy becomes yours only as you practice it during the daily crises of life and constantly put it into action as you make the great decisions of your life. The fact that you have studied Christianity a bit, read a few selections from the Bible and gone to church occasionally does not make Christianity your faith. Do you live it? That is the supreme test. Until you do live it and until it has been tried and not found wanting, you won't be willing to suffer for it, sacrifice for it, or die for it, as did the early Christians and the Pilgrim fathers.

Faith, therefore, is the first thing. Obedience is the second thing. Another man who suffered imprisonment for his faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaks to this matter:

"Only he who believes is obedient, only he who is obedient, believes. For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience."

Unless you believe in God you will not obey his will. Unless you obey him your belief will weaken and die.

The Pilgrim fathers also recognized that faith and obedience belonged together--not only obedience to God, but obedience to the duly constituted authority. For that reason, 41 out of the 65 male passengers on the Mayflower signed their names to that noble document which was the first instrument in history signed by those it was designed to govern--the Mayflower Compact:

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"In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James; by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France and Ireland King; Defender of the Faith; etc."

"Having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; (we) do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation; and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and, by virtue hereof, to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

"In witness whereof, we have hereunder subscribed our names. Cape Cod, 11th of November, in year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James of England, France and Ireland 18; and of Scotland 54, Anno Domini 1620."

VI

Freedom is a hard bought thing. Millions have paid with their lives for it. Along with faith, it is one of God's two greatest gifts to men. Cherish it, honor it, use it wisely and well. Once it is lost, it may well require another 350 years to reclaim it.