

December 31, 1972
Genesis 3:1-10a
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THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM

Being the father of one child who has finished her college education, the father of another who is almost finished, and the father of two more who will soon begin that experience, I claim some degree of expertise this morning when I suggest that this is one of those Sundays of the year which should probably be designated "the Sabbath on which college students are most likely to attend a church service." They are away from their customary academic environment which is not likely to be highly church oriented, and at home with parents who are often known to apply a certain degree of pressure to "attend church this morning with the family" before returning to the ivy covered walls of academe.

For this reason it has been my custom for a number of years to address myself primarily on this Sunday morning to the students of the congregation and prayerfully hope that there may be a few present to address. Having just bathed himself in the various joys of Christmas and having received his bounty of gifts, one of which is probably a large check, the student is in as receptive a mood as he is ever likely to be when faced with the prospect of listening to a twenty minute sermon.

II

Some of the parting words with which every parent bids a fond farewell to his neophyte collegian in all likelihood go something like this: "Now you are going to have more freedom than you have ever had before. We hope you will use it with discretion and be guided by the teachings we have tried to instill in you during the past 18 arduous years."

It does not take long for the student to discover that he indeed has freedom and must make an awful lot of choices, many of which he is not well prepared to make. The average college freshman discovers within a few short weeks that, at a distance, and in the safety of the family cocoon, freedom seemed much more attractive than it now seems when it has become a condition which requires the making of constant difficult decisions, concerning class schedules, study habits, the use of drugs, how to deal with sex, vocational decisions, whether or not to join a Greek society, and if so which one, whether to live in the dorm or an apartment, who to date, where to go this week end, etc., etc., etc., ad infinitum.

When men and women in whatever state or condition do not have all the freedom they desire, freedom looks like the most wonderful thing in the world. But when all of this freedom is suddenly thrust

upon us we abruptly discover that freedom can also be, and usually is, a terrifying responsibility. That responsibility can weigh so heavily upon us that it becomes a real burden and we would sometimes prefer to return to those halcyon days when others made most of the difficult decisions for us.

When we are young and inexperienced we have visions of freedom in which we see it as merely the lack of restraint and the liberty to express and assert ourselves according to our own unrestricted will. In short, freedom then means to do what we please, if we please, and when we please, with no one to say us nay.

It is this latter concept of freedom that in very recent years has led many college and non-college young people into violent anarchy and revolution, a condition in which they were like little children shaking the slats on their cribs and screaming to high heaven because they were not permitted to get out of their cages which were designed for their own protection to prevent them from hurting themselves. They were also designed, of course, to protect innocent parents and orderly households from being catastrophically attacked by wild animals whose appetites for absolute freedom had not yet been tamed and controlled.

These young people, fired often by idealism and visions of a brave new world, were unfortunately still wearing blinders which prevented them from seeing what was being destroyed and cut down while they were intent on creating the object of their dreams. In case the students present are not old enough to know what blinders are-- or were-- blinders are shields put on a horse's eyes which prevent the horse from seeing anything save that which is directly in front of him.

Wisdom and experience eventually teach most of us that no person is ever absolutely free to "do his own thing". The consequence of "doing one's own thing" with unrestricted freedom, is usually to hurt and destroy others, or what others have laboriously sought to build and to plant. Absolute freedom for any person inevitably becomes a denial of freedom for other persons. As a legalistic mind once put it, my freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.

III

Freedom is therefore never an unmixed blessing, much as it is continually being praised by patriots and Fourth of July orators. Freedom puts upon all who possess it a burden whose weight is in direct proportion to the amount of freedom possessed. It is a burden of responsibility and every person who thinks he is acting in freedom ought to pause and ask himself: "Why am I doing this? Is there something better I ought to be doing that will better accomplish the end I desire? Have I carefully considered all the consequences of what I am doing?" If one does not or cannot stop to ask such questions as these, then he is not really acting in freedom, but blindly, selfishly and irrationally, or as the victim of group pressure or mass psychology.

Let me tell you of two experiences I had a couple of months ago with some loved ones and some friends. One Saturday morning some of my children accompanied me as I drove out into the open rolling country just southwest of here known as the South Kettle Moraine. Turning a corner on a little traveled side road, we suddenly came upon some bounding deer leaping across the road into the woods. It was an exciting and exhilarating experience in which we all rejoiced. A few days later my wife and I were with some friends near the Horicon Marsh. We stopped for lunch at a lovely dining place, the rear property of which was entirely encircled by a high fence enclosing again a number of deer. That sight, however, did not exhilarate me at all.

You see the difference--the difference that real freedom makes. In the one case the deer were free within the confines or limitations of their environment to be what God intended deer to be. In the other case the deer were much safer, were much better fed and more regularly fed, but were not in the condition in which God intended deer to be. In the first case they gave me a momentary thrill. In the latter case the sight of them saddened me. I am not one of those persons who visits zoos. To me a zoo is a very depressing place. I recognize the educational advantages of zoos, but zoos are not what God intended for his creatures.

Just so with man. I am happy with myself as a man, and I am happy with other men and women, when I see myself or them striving to become what God intended us to be.

Did God intend men to be free? Yes, I believe he did. But he cannot have intended them to be absolutely free, which is to live in a state of license or anarchy. For then no man can be free. And surely the same road of absolute freedom that leads an individual to crime leads a society to revolution. It is the road which demands freedom with no restraint--a freedom which is only self-assertion and self-will gone wild. This is not what God intended for man and it is not what will lead men individually or collectively toward happiness and peace. Animals have no burden attached to their enjoyment of freedom, but man has. His brain and his intellect are his glory and his burden. They tell him that sometimes he must limit his own freedom or freedom may well be lost for all.

IV

Now I must share with you a letter I received from a college sophomore earlier this year in which this lovely young lady wrote to tell me of a discussion she had with someone who read and interpreted the Bible with the blinders we spoke of a few moments ago. This person knew what she wanted the Bible to say and she made the Bible say it. My correspondent believed that to be a denial of freedom and a denial of the burden to use freedom wisely; to examine and question, not merely to parrot without using one's own critical faculties. Then she shared with me some lines from a poem which she

said was her current favorite. I admire her taste for the lines are from Charles Pierre Peguy (Pā-gē):

"All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright
attitude of a free man as he kneels.
All the submission, All the dejection
in the world
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of one single
invocation
From a love that is free."

That kind of freedom, you see, is not absolute, not unrestrained, not unrestricted license. To kneel before God is a burden; to pray is a burden; to think and to reflect is a burden; to submit is a burden; to love is a burden. But all of these are burdens that must be borne by him who would be truly free. St. Paul found that it was not until he became a slave to Christ that he became truly free.

All of this is perhaps what can be called the paradox of man. Nicholas Berdyaev, the Russian theologian, commenting on the writings of Feodor Dostoevsky, insisted,

". . . Man must accept an enormous responsibility
corresponding to his dignity as a free being."

Do not shun the burden of freedom. Do not shun the suffering which it may entail, for that suffering raises man to his highest level and is the measure of his manhood. Amen.