

November 11, 1973
Deuteronomy 8:1-10 (N.E.)
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FREEDOM IS NOT ENOUGH!

I would like to challenge you with a question: How much does your religious faith mean to you?

Does it mean so much that you would be willing to commit treason against your government, leave the church in which you have been raised, leave the country which you dearly loved, suffer severe economic and physical hardship, travel 3,000 miles across an ocean in a vessel whose seaworthiness is questionable, and enter a land of which you know practically nothing, inhabited by savages, where one-half of those who come with you will die within a few months?

You and I as members of a Congregational church are the spiritual descendants of men and women who did precisely that. One cannot believe that in doing it they had no fear or trepidation. Surely they must have had for they were human. But they had a faith greater than their fear. They were the passengers on the Mayflower; they were the Pilgrim Fathers, and in one sense they were the spiritual ancestors of every American. What they most surely believed about God and about the nature and destiny of man was written into our founding documents; the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, both of which are but echoes of the Mayflower Compact.

Today we Americans are striving for an ever higher standard of living. The Pilgrims strove just to stay alive during that first terrible winter when they buried the dead by night so that hostile Indians would not know how few were those who remained alive. Today in the midst of our material affluence over 20,000 Americans commit suicide every year and another 100,000 try it and fail. There is no record of any suicides in Plymouth Colony. They were poor and destitute by any standard of measurement, but they would do doubt have agreed with America's great poet, Robert Frost, when he said:

"When I think of all the good that has come from poverty, I would hesitate to abolish it."

II

The Pilgrim Fathers gave us a legacy of freedom. It is indeed a precious legacy and no one is more aware of and thankful for it than am I. But I have not struggled for it, suffered for it, or died for it as have so many others. I have merely enjoyed its fruits--fruits for which so many others fought, struggled and perished.

One who has any modicum of historical awareness must agree that the history of mankind is the history of a continual struggle for freedom. There have always been in human society those who have a lust for power over others and who will seize any opportunity to gain it, thus making eternal vigilance the constant price that must be paid for freedom.

Freedom is all of one piece. There can be no religious freedom where there is no political and economic freedom. Nor can political and economic freedom long endure where there is no religious freedom. We who are members of the free churches, who believe that the local congregation must always be the essence of the church and that therein dwells the spirit of Christ, are fond of talking about our freedom and often lament the lack of freedom that exists elsewhere. Important, however, as freedom is, it is not enough. Freedom once attained, be it religious, economic or political, is not self-perpetuating. And those who would do nothing but sit back and enjoy their freedom are destined to lose it.

All of you know of my great interest in Greece. Even my barber is a Greek. Recently we were engaged in the usual one-sided conversation when he told me of an argument he had recently had with his uncle. The uncle is a loyal and faithful admirer of the Greek heritage. Said he one day to his nephew, who has developed very little appreciation for his Greek past, "How can you ignore 4,000 glorious years of Greek history?" Replied the nephew, "What has it done for me lately?" That, we may argue, is a somewhat cynical and certainly an unappreciative view of one's historical background. It is nevertheless a relevant question.

We Congregationalists might well be asked the same question. We are proud of our heritage, we admire the Pilgrim Fathers, we appreciate the freedom they bequeathed us, but what have we done lately to make our religious convictions significant and meaningful to the 20th century? I repeat, freedom is not enough. It is not enough without dedication, without a sense of responsibility, without a sense of obligation, without a willingness to suffer for the principles to which we claim to give our loyalty.

III

It is this about which Americans today need to think most seriously--responsibility. It had to be a European who pointed out to us not too many years ago that we had on the east coast of our country, a Statue of Liberty, and what we now needed on our west coast was a Statue of Responsibility to remind us that freedom is not free, that once obtained it does not endure automatically without effort, without vigilance, and a deep awareness of our God-given responsibilities.

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He who chronicled those early events of 1620, William Bradford, described how the Mayflower passengers, or as they sometimes called themselves, "the Lord's free people", covenanted together--bound themselves by the Mayflower Compact, and later on in their churches by church covenants. They fully realized that their newly won freedom laid heavy burdens of responsibility upon them.

The Mayflower Compact provides for "laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices from time to time as shall be thought most needed and convenient for the general good of the colony, under which we promise to do submission and obedience."

The covenant of the first organized Congregational Church in America, founded in 1629 at Salem, Massachusetts, and after which our own church covenant is fashioned, reads,

"We covenant with the Lord and with one another and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all his ways according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth."

No, freedom is not enough. Freedom is an illusion, a will-o-the-wisp, an unattainable ideal without an equal or even greater sense of individual responsibility, and it is sheer historical ignorance to suppose that anyone else or anything else, including government, can assume that responsibility for us. There must be individual responsibility.

The freedom and the autonomy of the local church has been the preoccupying center of concern for our free Congregational churches during the past fifteen years. Perhaps it needed to be. But I am confident that it ought not be our sole Christian concern. Freedom is merely a rich opportunity to serve God. The most basic question the free man must always ask himself is, "What am I going to do with my freedom?"

Far too many of us seem to have felt that freedom has meant the right to do as we please. We have interpreted it to mean that no one could tell us what to do. Such misinterpretation, I fear, has often made us deaf to the voice of God as he seeks to reveal to us what we ought to do. As Christians we are not to do what we please, but as God pleases.

"The voice of God is calling its summons unto men;
As once he spoke in Zion, so now he speaks again."

And we had better prepare ourselves to listen and to respond, else like the salt that has lost its savor, we shall be good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men.

Let me share with you a parable of Jesus. It is not an easy one to interpret. Said the Master:

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself. They enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."

What Jesus is saying is that if indeed we drive out of a man the evil that pervades his mind and thus make clean his mind, but stop there and put nothing worthwhile and constructive and positive in its place, we do not really help that man. We may indeed make his last state worse than his first.

We may liken our situation to what is being done in modern psychiatry today. During the past few years we have been dismissing as many people from mental institutions as are being admitted. About 60% of all schizophrenics can now be restored. Psychiatry is doing its job. It is driving the evil intelligences--the conflicts, the repressions--out of the human mind. But psychiatry stops there; its job is finished. Somehow or other that cleansed mind, the empty room, must now be filled with the good, the true and the beautiful, for an empty mind may be prey to an even greater evil than that which previously possessed it.

This then is the task of religion and because it is the task of religion it is the task of the church and of individual Christians.

Many young people confront the minister with the question, "What do we Congregationalists believe?" May God have mercy on us if our only answer is that we believe we are free to do, to believe and to worship as we please. That is not Congregationalism. Certainly it is not Christianity. Real Christianity and real Congregationalism means that we believe every man ought to be free to accept his responsibility to be a servant of Almighty God.

Only then can we continue to be "The Lord's Free People".