

"OUR LEGACY OF FREEDOM"
June 30, 1991

TEXT: John 8:36 "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."

Inasmuch as next Thursday is the Fourth of July, I would like to focus our thoughts this morning on "Our Legacy of Freedom." Like many others, I often preach about freedom this time of year, but today that subject seems even more pertinent than usual. During the past eleven months, American men and women were once again asked to risk their lives in that great cause. Many, like my son, faced months of danger and inconvenience. Others, like Scott Schroeder, gave their lives that freedom might flourish, not only here, but around the world.

Scott's sacrifice and that of others like him remind us that freedom is far from free. It has been dearly purchased by the courage of brave men and women in many generations. And it will continue to flourish only as long as you and I, like those patriots of 1776, nurture and protect it with "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

Of all our many blessings --and they are many, indeed--surely none is more precious, nor more costly, than our cherished freedom, of which General Omar Bradley once wrote, "No word was ever spoken that held greater hope, demanded greater sacrifice, needed more to be nurtured, blessed more the giver . . . or came closer to being God's will on earth." Nothing is more precious. And nowhere is its celebration more appropriate than here in the church.

For we are one of its chief beneficiaries, as I was reminded one Sunday in 1977. My wife and I were traveling in Germany with a group of people from the first International Congregational Fellowship meeting. Our worship setting that morning was the Protestant Chapel at the Dachau Concentration Camp just outside of Munich. Our preacher was an elderly German pastor who, himself, had been imprisoned there from 1941 till liberated by allied troops near the end of the war. His crime? He had held Ascension Day services when Hitler had told them not to.

And he was not alone. He told us that each of the one hundred twenty seven prisoners crowded into his little barracks was either a minister or a priest. Sooner or later, all tyrants must try to suppress the church. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote nearly two centuries ago, "Christianity is the companion of liberty in all its conflicts, the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims."

We also celebrate freedom here in church because, as Bill Grede liked to say when he was President of the National

Association of Manufacturers, "Freedom as we understand it in America, is not an economic discovery. It is not . . . even a political discovery. Freedom, in the last analysis, is a religious discovery."

Those brave men who voted for independence two hundred fifteen years ago were more than just patriots. They were also men of deep and abiding faith. When they literally took their lives in their hands and signed the Declaration of Independence, they did so in the firm belief that personal liberty was a divine gift. They said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

For them, freedom was not to be sought just because it was pleasant and enjoyable, nor even because it meant relief from the crown's annoying taxes. For them, liberty was a spiritual necessity which had to be reflected in the body politic. And they knew that liberty could never endure without the continued blessings of God who gave it.

In 1787, when the Founding Fathers gathered in Philadelphia to draft the Constitution of the United States, even the free thinking Benjamin Franklin believed that. One day, when the work of the convention had become bogged down by one dispute after another, Dr. Franklin rose to his feet to offer this resolution:

"I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth --that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings that 'except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this, and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel

"I therefore beg leave to move --that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business" That motion passed, and, from that time on, the work of the convention proceeded without undue delay. Should we, then, who have lived so freely and so happily under that constitution, not also offer thanks to God for the freedoms we enjoy.

But let us beware. Political liberty and true freedom are not always the same. The greatest of our freedoms are conveyed, not by the Declaration of Independence, nor even by the Constitution, but by our Lord, Himself. In this morning's scripture Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32)

How often we have heard that phrase out of context and robbed of its original intent. For it is applied sooner or later to almost every kind of learning experience. I will not deny that all knowledge comes from God and is, in some way, liberating, but that is not what Jesus meant.

What he was saying was, "If you faithfully live according to my teachings, you will discover how true they are. And their truth will set you free." That is the source of true liberty. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6)

Now, not everyone believed that. Some of those who listened to Jesus resented his words. They said, "We are the descendants of Abraham. And we have never in our lives been anyone's slaves. How can you say to us, 'You will be set free'?" Like many today they thought that just because they did as they pleased they were, therefore, free. But they were not. And because they were not, they resented Jesus all the more.

I know people today who react in much the same way. I remember a former parishioner, who one day said to me, "I know I don't go to church much, but what the heck, the way I figure it, we're all Americans!" Yet that same man would call me at one o'clock in the morning, when he had had too much to drink, to tell me how unhappy he was. Like all of us who live in this great country he was politically free, but he was still the prisoner of his own weakness.

A long time ago William Penn said, "Men must be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants." And it matters little whether that tyrant is one's self or someone else. We have political freedom, yes, but are we truly free? Are we truly happy?

It would seem that many of us are not. That is why we spend so much money on entertainment, on tranquilizers, on therapy. In order to forget --if only for a little while-- that in discarding the rules, in doing our own thing, in wallowing in self-gratification, we have become our own worst enemies.

In I Peter 2:16 we read "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." That is the secret of true freedom --to live as the servants of God. Freedom from the soil is no freedom for a tree. And our natural soil, in which alone we grow and flourish is the Spirit of God. He has created us for Himself, as Augustine reminds us, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Him.

True liberty comes not through what we are free from, but by what we bind ourselves to. This Fourth of July let us celebrate our freedom. And, this year especially, let us remember what it costs. But, as we celebrate, let us also remember that Jesus said: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."