

". . . PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT THE LAND . . ."

Leviticus 25:1-24
Luke 4:16-21

July 2, 2023
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The theme of liberty runs like a continuous thread through the fabric of American history. It courses through the veins of the nation's people. We sing, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty . . . Let freedom ring." In every verse of our National Anthem, the concluding refrain sings of "the land of the free . . ." The early American revolutionaries called themselves the "Sons of Liberty." In our pledge of allegiance we speak of a nation with "liberty and justice for all." In the New York harbor, where she has greeted millions of immigrants and refugees who have come to our shores, and now inspires people as far away as Beijing, stands the Statue of Liberty.

The words "liberty" and "freedom" abound in the speeches and documents of our founding fathers. Washington called liberty the basis of our independency and national character [VALEDICTION]. The Declaration of Independence speaks of certain unalienable rights, among which are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. As stated in the Preamble, the Constitution of the United States was ordained and established "to secure the Blessings of Liberty." The Bill of Rights begins with the guarantee of four basic freedoms: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

Who can forget the words with which Patrick Henry reputedly stirred the members of the Virginia Assembly before the colonists had clearly resolved to wrest their independence from the British: "Give me liberty or give me death!" What is perhaps the most memorable speech in all our nation's history, spoken by the man who came to be known as the Great Emancipator, begins: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty . . ." Lincoln closed his Gettysburg Address with these consecrated words: "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom . . ."

It was during another time of great national crisis that another President of the United States delivered his famous "Four Freedoms" speech. In 1941, when our nation was on the brink of World War II, Franklin Roosevelt urged the nation to look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. Two of these would have sounded familiar: freedom of speech and expression, and freedom of religion. These are among the freedoms enshrined in our nation's Bill of Rights. They are what I think of as democratic or civil or political rights, freedoms essential to a free society. But to these political freedoms FDR added two others that may be even more essential, though they are not so obviously articulated in our Constitution: freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

For over 25 years I've been a member of the Bloomington Human Rights Commission. I've also been a member of the Monroe County Human Rights Commission since its inception 12 years ago. Both commissions exist to enforce ordinances against bias and discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. During this time I've grown in my realization of the many ways that people can be mistreated, and thereby have their lives diminished, sometimes just because of who they are. In such cases we may be able to help them make a case against discrimination and we may obtain some reparation or redress. But there are also often circumstances in which people are mistreated and oppressed for which no legal protections exist. My service on the Human Rights Commissions, in conjunction with my lifelong interest in biblical teachings and in ethics, has enlarged and enriched my

understanding that human rights are much more basic and much more extensive than any law can prescribe or any legal protections can provide.

Though I am not a historian, I suspect that an examination of the major documents, legislation, and speeches in our history would reveal a gradual evolution in our understanding of liberty, an evolution which has moved us from a predominantly political conception to one with significant social and economic dimensions as well. We have come to see that the exercise of liberty, or freedom, is related to the material and social conditions of life. Poverty, ignorance, and disease are actually enemies of freedom.

We have a long way to go as a society, however, to grasp the truth of this. For too many people, freedom seems to mean that everyone has a right to sleep under a bridge, or get their meals at the local soup kitchen. If we were serious about the full range of human rights, we would understand that they include freedom from want and freedom from fear. No one should ever have to sleep under a bridge at night, and no one should have to take their meals at a soup kitchen. How can one be free if one is starving, or is lacking shelter? How can one be free if one is denied access to education, or if one lacks the resources for needed medical care? The provision of political rights and the removal of legal obstacles are insufficient to secure the blessings of liberty. Something in the way of positive intervention is required as well. There is no real liberty where the blessings of liberty have been effectively denied.

Freedom, understood as non-interference and non-intervention, has had to make room for freedom understood as the possibility to act to pursue the conditions of a fuller human existence. It is not enough for there to be a freedom from external constraints that violate the integrity of the individual, there must also be a freedom for meaningful and responsible engagement. There must be freedom for engagement in work, in political and commercial activity, in social intercourse, in cultural expression, in the on-going creative activity of the world. What good is freedom from external constraint if one cannot read, cannot get a job, cannot afford medical care, cannot live on one's retirement income? True freedom must include the freedom to fail, but that does not mean the freedom to starve when one has failed. Thomas Jefferson must have had in mind the elementary conditions necessary for meaningful human freedom when he listed among his "unalienable rights" the Pursuit of Happiness, though he did not appreciate the full extent to which our destinies hang upon circumstances beyond our individual control.

One of the central teachings of Jesus is that life does not consist of our possessions, nor in the status we have achieved, nor in the things we have done. Life's joy is not to be found in what is external and extrinsic to our labors. Then why concern ourselves with the social and economic conditions of our world? Doesn't the Christian gospel transcend all these. Doesn't the freedom of Christians lie not in what they have, but in who they are! We affirm that the human spirit can transcend the material conditions of life. Nobody needs to be rich, or even comfortable, to be happy and blessed.

But there is within our religious heritage another important refrain. The scriptures are very interested in the relationships of human beings to material things, and to each other with respect to material things. Freedom is not pure spirituality, or freedom from the world. It is a quality of human existence that must always be concretely manifested in the world.

The words of my sermon title this morning are inscribed about the circumference of this nation's symbol

of freedom, the Liberty Bell. But the words are originally to be found in the 25th chapter of Leviticus, verse 10: ". . . proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof . . ." The Liberty Bell takes Leviticus as its text on freedom! What understanding of freedom does Leviticus proclaim?

The proclamation of liberty, urged upon the Hebrew people in chapter 25, was to be accompanied by the year of "jubilee." Every 50th year the people were to observe this jubilee. The land was to lie fallow, that it might have rest from production. All debts were to be remitted, canceled, no matter how large, if the debtor was unable to pay. All Hebrews who had indentured themselves, sold themselves as slaves in order to pay their debts, were to be released. All lands were to be returned to their original owners, even though they had been acquired by legitimate means. No one was to be allowed indefinitely to acquire great wealth at the expense of others, and no one was to be allowed indefinitely to be poor. There was to be, in effect, a redistribution of wealth. All the inequalities and inequities accumulated through the years were to be erased and all God's people were to begin again as they had been before [John Howard Yoder, *THE POLITICS OF JESUS*, 36]. The liberty proclaimed in the year of jubilee meant freedom from poverty, freedom from debt, freedom from slavery, freedom from all forms of economic disadvantage and oppression. The jubilee was not to be a time for pursuit of economic advantage of any kind; even the land was to be temporarily retired from production.

Evidence is lacking that the Hebrew people ever completely observed the provisions of the year of jubilee. The ideal, however, remained in the life of the people. Biblical scholar Howard Yoder found in the familiar words of the 61st chapter of Isaiah an expansion of this ideal by the prophet who thus proclaims the year of the LORD's favor: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; [God] has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those that are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."

Are these words familiar? In the Gospel of Luke they become the inaugural message of Jesus' ministry. Jesus identifies his ministry with these words. They might very well serve as a Christian manifesto. The spirit of jubilee is in them. The Leviticus ideal of liberation from economic oppression and servitude has been expanded to include the liberation of the spirit; but the social ideal of economic liberation remains. After all, in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is said to teach his disciples to pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." If there is anything in scripture that should be taken literally, this may be it.

The ancient Hebrew religious community understood, and Jesus understood, that human freedom is not the property of individuals. People are not free by themselves, but only in their relations with each other. If you are not free, then I cannot be fully free. If I am not free, then you cannot be fully free. Human freedom is always compromised when it is enjoyed by some people in a society and not by others.

The ancient Hebrews and Jesus also perceived that great legal and social inequalities, especially great disparities in ownership of property and the means of production, create social division. Wealth tends to isolate the rich from the poor. Privilege desensitizes the privileged toward those who have no place. Power blinds the powerful to the needs of the weak. Human freedom requires human community, and human community requires the overcoming of disparities of power and wealth and privilege that set people apart. Human freedom and human community require overcoming the means by which some are exploited and some are exploiters, some oppressed and some oppressors, some slaves and some masters,

some notorious sinners and some reputedly righteous.

Before 1839 the Liberty Bell was known as the Independence Bell. But 1839 saw the rise of the anti-slavery movement of the Liberty Party. Some people began to see that if there was to be liberty for all the inhabitants of the land, the slaves must be freed. As Lincoln later observed, "this government cannot permanently endure half slave and half free."

Thomas Jefferson had said that our nation would need a revolution every 30 years. Otherwise the liberties we enjoyed would not last. The Hebrews thought that every 50 years would probably be enough! The point is that liberty is threatened wherever social divisions exist. Liberty is diminished where concentrations of power and privilege and vested interest arise.

There is still much liberation to be done. The full measure of the blessings of liberty has yet to be secured for the people whose ancestors were slaves. Many others are equally oppressed. Women have yet to attain full equality under law. Liberty requires that justice and equal rights be embodied in concrete ways, in schools, in jobs, in housing. Our progressive income tax, along with inheritance taxes, was meant in part to be a system for the redistribution of wealth, but it is failing to accomplish that end. The gap between rich and poor, once diminishing in our society, has now grown to new and utterly unconscionable heights. This is to say nothing about the great disparities that exist in our larger world

Jefferson is supposed to have said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." The price is also continual struggle and renewal. Liberty requires the periodic reformation and reconstitution of social and economic and political arrangements, because liberty requires community. Community can hardly exist where some have their fill while others go hungry, where some make the rules and others must abide by them, where some consume at leisure what the labors of others have produced. True freedom is not freedom from others, to do as we please. True freedom is freedom in relation to others, for others, with others, in relation to all the endowments of this world. As the ancient Hebrews seem to have understood, and as Jesus showed, the liberty we prize needs to be embodied in community if its blessings are to be secured. AMEN.