

“Let Freedom Ring”

I Kings 19:15-16,19-21, Galatians 5:1, 13-26, Luke 9:51-62

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 30, 2019, Pentecost 3, Proper 8, dedicated to Emerson Joy Bruckelmeyer on her baptismal day, to our nation on our 243rd birthday and always to the glory of God!

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“Let Freedom Ring”

Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The heat was rising in the last half of June. With pressure mounting from the people across the country and throughout the world, it was unclear that those chosen to form a just and free path forward would be able to break their political logjams and make any decisions. Would they do the right thing and fight for freedom or would they show their lack of courage and do nothing at all?

The date was June 28, 1776 -- 243 years ago this week, when the men gathered in Philadelphia finally had their breakthrough moment. With these opening words, they were challenged to walk the way of freedom:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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...

Outside of this opening, which many of us now know by heart, the men in the Second Continental Congress began to edit the rest of Thomas Jefferson's words in the "Declaration of Independence." When their edits were finished, the members of the Second Continental Congress, representing 13 colonies, cut about a quarter of Jefferson's words – including the section in which Jefferson declared King George's imposition of slavery upon the colonies would be ended by this Congress. As we know, the dissolution of this paragraph would set in motion another 90 years of slavery and misery for most African-Americans and eventually brought on our Civil War.

Bitterly debated, this phrase was omitted in order to “hold the fragile union together.”

On July 2nd, the Congress finally had their compromise document on which to vote. As the words were finally read publicly on July 4th, the bell of the Pennsylvania Statehouse rang out FREEDOM! Later in time, we would know this day as Independence Day, this bell as the Liberty Bell and this Pennsylvania Statehouse as Independence Hall. The bells of freedom were ringing. The war with England had officially begun.

Freedom is hard to grasp and harder to hold in any generation. Just as our Founding Fathers struggled to grasp it so long ago, we struggle, too. Last Sunday, June 23rd, as the heat was rising on our southern border, two more died in their attempt to cross their River of Freedom and enter our Land of Promise.

They had names. Salvadoran migrant Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, drown while attempting to cross the Rio Grande, near Brownsville, Texas. Martínez's wife, Tania, said she and her husband decided to cross the Rio Grande after waiting for two months for a response to their asylum request from the United States. Hoping to cross the river into Brownsville, Texas, Martínez first crossed with his daughter and left her along alone while returning back to help his wife cross. However, upon being left

alone, Valeria was panicked, became frightened and jumped into the river.

When Martínez rushed to save her, he and his daughter were instead dragged by the current. Tania was rescued by a person nearby, she told La Jornada, a Mexican paper. Sadly, the next day, Martinez and Valeria were found downstream on the edge of the riverbank with their arms wrapped around each other. A picture of the two of them in the shallow water by the river's edge has saddened the world and sparked outrage against the U.S. government due to squalid conditions at migrant facilities as well as increasingly harsher policies against immigrants, many of whom are from Central America, fleeing their countries due to violence, poverty and corruption.

The bells of freedom never rang for Martinez and Valeria. Only the bells tolling death rang out for the two of them. Along with at least eight other children who have died in the custody of our government and thousands of others who have died trying to get to freedom in our land, we, as a nation are not reflecting the vision, the daring, the courage of those who set us on a path which declared the self-evident truths that all people are created equal and endowed with the unalienable rights that include “*Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...*”

If we are to let freedom ring, we, as a nation have to release the clappers on the bells and let the bells of freedom ring out! We have to be Free and we have to protect and defend the

freedom of others. This means aligning ourselves with leaders, nations and people who believe in freedom and who do not destroy the human rights of their citizens. We have to stop standing with those who oppose freedom and oppress their people. Instead, we must choose Freedom and the virtues and values of Freedom in all we say and do.

Paul's letter to the Christians at Galatia invites us to think about freedom, law, love, flesh and Spirit. He shows the challenges of living into freedom. These challenges often try to keep us from living the free lives we are called to live. Central to our calling as Christians is work of freedom which Micah 6:8 says is to “do justice, love tenderly and to walk humbly with God (and our fellow human beings).

We are called to walk and live and act in the Spirit of Freedom. This may sometimes put us at odds with the "law" or “practice” of those who are not living and acting in the spirit of Freedom. Then, we are called to change the laws which bring about the crushing of our fellow human beings.

Currently, there are laws and practices which are crushing the human spirit "on the border" and behind closed doors where legal policies are formed that often discriminate, discredit and erase. If we are working in the Spirit of Freedom, we are working to set those laws and practices on the path of justice for all.

This is not always an easy way to go. But, we know, in our heart of hearts it is the right way to go. Paul tells us that our Freedom is Freedom “IN Christ.” Here is how Paul says it, as we read in Galatians 5:13-26, interpreted through The Message by Eugene Peterson. Listen carefully to the spirit of freedom in Christ Jesus, our Savior. From Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we hear both the way which holds us back and the way which sets us free. Be patient as I read and listen carefully to Paul’s brilliant writing – Paul’s declaration for Freedom.

13-15 It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?

16-18 My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don’t you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

19-21 It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you; you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

22-23 But what happens when we live God's way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

23-24 Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

25-26 Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a

sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

So, in this week of celebrating our Freedom as a nation, let us stand with Freedom in Christ. Let us stand with freedom for all. Let us choose life in the Spirit. And in so doing, let freedom ring. Amen.

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