

“Freedom”

Isaiah 66:10-14; Galatians 6: 7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 7, May 29, 2022, dedicated to the 19 students, and two teachers slaughtered at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, to Irma Garcia’s husband Joe who died of a massive heart attack following the death of his wife, to the person murdered in Geneva Presbyterian Church in Monterey, CA and to the ten African Americans slaughtered in Buffalo, NY, to their surviving families and to their classmates, co-teachers, parishioners and family in all three places and also to Lola Davis Edwards and Rupert “Twink” Starr, Veterans of WWII and members of First Church this Memorial Day 2022, and always to the glory of God!

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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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In the Book of Exodus, chapter 7, verse 26, the struggle for freedom is distilled in the conflict between Moses and Pharoah in which God gradually raises the suffering of the slaveholding, slave-driving Egyptians as a result of Pharoah’s stubborn refusal to let Israel go.

The Eternal One says to Moses, *“You go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Eternal One – Let My People go, that they may serve Me!’”*

God declares that God’s people should be free – free to worship God. They should be free to choose between good and evil. They should be free to choose between generosity and selfishness; free to fully be who they were created to be – not slaves, not less than human in any way, not beholden to a tyrant, not tied to a way which chains the body or the mind.

God’s plan is always for freedom!

God calls us to be Free!

Four weeks ago today, I was in Dachau Concentration Camp in the town of Dachau, Germany. Dachau was Hitler’s first Concentration Camp and served as the prototype of the more than 44,000 camps and other incarceration sites (including ghettos) that Hitler set up from 1933-1945 (reference from the official Holocaust website). As I walked this sacred earth, I felt as though I was walking through the heart of darkness ☹☹– the absolute antithesis of a freedom land.

The Camp opened March 22, 1933. Moving silently through the history of Dachau, one of the very first signs I read named the first people brought to the camp. It was stunning – particularly if you go back a month and consider what was written on this sign. The sign read – “Homosexuals and Women Who Had Abortions.” LGBTQIA Germans and Women who made choices not to carry their pregnancies forward – and doctors who provided medical support to women in their choices were the first ones imprisoned, flogged, tortured, tormented, and murdered in Dachau. Add to this, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Emigrants, Communists, Socialists, comedians, trade

unionists, and yes, Hitler's number one target, the Jews – who came in the tens of thousands after 1938. As the prototype camp, Heinrich Himmler, head of the German SS, saw to it that all other camps and detention sites were run like Dachau. And he brought everyone who ran those camps to be trained “correctly” at Dachau.

As I stood there, absorbing this horrifying truth about fascism and ultimately about freedom, my mind drifted to Pastor Martin Niemoller – who started out as a pastor supporter of Adolph Hitler and eventually turned against him as the truth of his narcissistic sociopathic reign of terror continued.

Niemoller said: *First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.*

“I did not speak out...” Those words are haunting – especially when you stand in a place which was formed by the heart of darkness in this world's darkest hours.

Today, we stand at a crossroad in our nation's history. At this crossroad we have a few significant patriots standing up to speaking out with truth to power. Three of my favorites are true lifelong Republicans – Rep. Liz Cheney, Rep. Adam Kinzinger and now 25 year old, Cassidy Hutchinson, an aide to former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows. They have pitched their tents on the side of truth-telling, and justice and freedom. They are speaking out even as they are assaulted and lied about by the former president and members of their own beloved party. Thanks be to God for Liz, Adam and Cassidy.

But wait there is more on this Freedom Sunday. We also are witnesses at this crossroads to a new super majority of the Supreme Court with a dangerous vision of “history and tradition.” In just the last ten days, the Supreme Court has attacked at least four standards that have stood for nearly half a century. It has taken a hammer to the wall of separation between church and state in approving the football coach to pray with his players at the 50 yard line following Friday night games, allowed the southern state of Louisiana to weaken the voting power of African Americans, and called into question the right to privacy that secured a right to legal abortion (as well naming in that decision same-sex marriage, access to contraception, and potentially even interracial marriage) and the last decision has declared that the Environmental Protection Agency can’t do its job of environmental protection – a precedent that is frightening in relation to our ability to fight global warming and also has stunning and disastrous consequences for all other agencies and government operations meant to serve the freedoms and greater good of our most vulnerable citizens and communities.

In all of these cases, The Supremes tossed these decision-making powers to the Congress and State governments which is as disingenuous, idiotic as any decision that has come out of the pillared-halls of the Court since the Dred Scott decision in 1857 – which as you know, helped fuel the American Civil War four years later!

I don’t know about you, but I can’t imagine our Congress, which has failed for the past 30 years until the last ten days to pass any legislation about regulating guns – even in the face of tens of thousands of gun related deaths – ever being able to formulate and enact any policies which care for the earth underneath our feet, in our

water and our skies in America not to mention those who are poor and forgotten who live upon this earth we call our homeland.

As troubling as these decisions are, there is an even more dangerous common thread connecting them. This court is systematically erecting a new judicial standard based on an invocation of “history and tradition” that is rooted in a vision of a mythical 1950s white Christian America (reference to Dr. Robert Jones, PRRI Executive Director, in a blog posted on July 1, 2022).

So is this what freedom looks like? I certainly hope not.

On this Fourth of July weekend, I pray to the Eternal One that we are freed from such “freedom” as this.

Rather, let us follow the way of God to the pathways of freedom – believing that the liberties and freedoms we cherish for ourselves must be extended to all. Not one of us can be free all by our lonesome selves. Each one of our lives is a part of a greater life – the life of humanity – the life of all who are created to be free.

On this Fourth of July weekend, Paul’s letter to the Galatians, nicknamed “the Gospel of Christian Freedom,” challenges us with an image of power and glory that undercuts all sorts of pride. Paul’s voice booms humbly through the Scriptures, saying, “*May I never boast of anything but the cross.*” According to Paul, no attempt at virtue can make us worthy of God’s love and grace. God’s love and grace are ours – free and unmerited. In Christ, we encounter “God with Skin on,” who identifies humbly with us – even while we seek a God who conforms to our ideals of power and might.

You see, Jesus spent his life in mission to give living witness to God’s vulnerability and noncompulsory interaction with humanity. When

Jesus commissioned the 70 disciples in Luke 10 (creating an image for all disciples going forth), he sent them “as lambs among wolves.” Jesus sent his disciples to serve others. He equipped them with nothing more than the Gospel message of the reign of God. That is it. Just bring the Kingdom of God, the reign of God and the Love of God to all they met on the way. They were to demonstrate the reign of God in the only future so powerfully that it would last all this time for us to grab hold of it even now.

In order for the disciples to understand the message they were preaching, Jesus insisted that their gift to others be couched in poverty. As unshod missionaries without money or provisions, they needed bed and board at the same time they were seeking new hearts and homes for Christ’s message of love.

In Jesus’ methodology, the 70 missionaries could not preach their message of mutual love and vulnerability unless they were living it and learning from it from moment to moment.

What are we to take from these readings on this Freedom holiday weekend?

First, we need to pay attention to how countercultural our Gospel is. We may live in the “most powerful nation on earth,” but the might of our country has very little to do with the vulnerable, noncoercive character of God’s divine power.

Second, Jesus sent his disciples out without snack packs, credit cards or reservations at any AirBnBs, without any hotels set aside. He just sent them out. In our version of that type of vulnerability, we are called to give humble witness to the Gospel of peacemaking, the

Gospel of freedom-seeking and justice for all who are marginalized in our society filled with violence, individualism, and private privilege. Being chosen begins to sound more dangerous than special when you are fighting for freedom and justice for all – but that’s what we are called to do (inspired by St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGlone serves on the congregational leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, in the National Catholic Reporter, Saturday, July 2, 2022).

Like our ancestors, each one of us is called in spite of our flaws. We must learn from the 70 the tough lessons of freedom in our fight for what is right, what is just and what it true. To paraphrase Jesus, sometimes we will knock Satan down and sometimes Satan will knock us down. But if we remember who we are and who has chosen us, we won’t need to worry about any of the wolves.

As we step out of church today and into the remainder of this 246th birthday celebration for our great nation, I leave you with this quote from Abraham Lincoln, delivered two years before he became President – two years before most Americans even knew who he was when he said it. Abe Lincoln said in a speech in Edwardsville, Illinois, September 13, 1858:

What constitutes the bulwark of our own liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and our navy. These are not our reliance against tyranny. All of these may be turned against us without making us weaker for the struggle. Our reliance is the love of liberty which God has planted in each one of us. Our defense is the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men (people), in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors. Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage and you prepare your own limbs to wear

them. Accustomed to trample on the rights of others, you have lost the genius of your independence and become the fit subjects of the first cunning tyrant who rises among you (if you do not know who you are).

May freedom burn in our hearts. And may we speak out and act out for what is right, for what is true and for what is just – now and always – with the Cross of Jesus Christ guiding us. In the shadow of the cross, may we feel and know the grace and love of our savior Jesus Christ.

And as you go forth today, remember it is in Him that we know what true freedom looks like. Amen.

