The Multiple Meanings of Freedom

A homily by Chuck Fawns

Given at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos

July 6, 2014

You may remember Janis Joplin in the song *Me and Bobby Mcgee* singing that “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose”. Or is it? How do each of us define freedom? Do we have our own definition of freedom, but limit the freedom of others? Is one person’s or one group’s freedom more important than another? How do we reconcile these dilemmas?

I noticed that the presentation today has been advertised as a homily. Just to make sure I was following the guidelines I looked up the definition for homily which was “a tedious moralizing discourse”. If I notice too many yawns or untimely exits, I’ll just stop.

But I digress.

There are our Constitutional freedoms – the Bill of Rights – Ammendment I states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”. There are nine other amendments, some of which, in this day and age are somewhat controversial, to say the least. For instance, is it freedom and a right under Amendment II, for the people to keep and bear arms? How far is that freedom intended to go? Is Google infringing on our right, or freedom, to be free of unreasonable searches and seizures? Does the eighth amendment preclude the death penalty when it states, cruel and unusual punishments shall not be inflicted? As we know, these are questions not easily answered.

Thomas Paine once wrote, “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must… undergo the fatigue of supporting it.” Jean-Paul Sartre said, “Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.” Robert Frost said, “If society fits you comfortably enough, you call it freedom.” And Virginia Woolf said, “To enjoy freedom we have to control ourselves.” People often talk about freedom as “freedom from…” But what about the more positive idea of “freedom to…”? And what’s the relationship of responsibility to freedom?

So how do we reconcile these statements with balancing individual freedom and governmental restrictions?

Writing in *The American Creed* a book by Forrest Church, former minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City.

He says, and I quote, “When the Founders gathered one wiltingly hot July in Philadelphia to hammer out their dreams into a single, ringing declaration, they were fashioning precepts as sacred as they were secular. As a group, they were not notably religious men. But they were united, almost miraculously, in forging a union that transcended, even as it encompassed, the historical particularity of the present crisis. Fired with ardor and apprehension – the prospect of a long war, its outcome uncertain – America’s first citizens performed an almost perfect act of alchemy. In their crucible were transfigured the elements that would reflect America’s promise and set the measure for its fulfillment. This new nation was, as the founders knew, an experiment. Like all experiments, it started with a precept, a "given" – in this case a set of truths so rock-ribbed and essential that they were deemed "self-evident." Truth cast in language that, in turn, spells out the truth for succeeding generations deserves to be called a creed. So it was with Thomas Jefferson’s preamble to the Declaration of Independence. The faith of a nation is captured in its words, words that distill a mission while investing future citizens with a sacred charge.

"Creed" sounds forbidding and ecclesiastical. The American Creed is neither, but it is monumental. Creeds have to be monumental, struck in metal that, when refined in the furnace of history and burnished by developing thought, can endure the trials of time. They have to be steadfast enough to redeem history itself, reawakening tired minds, rekindling passion in hearts grown weary. Creeds are spiritual touchstones. They are finished in fire, yet cool to the touch when passed from hand to hand one generation to the next. Capturing the essence of the American experiment, the American Creed affirms those truths our founders held self-evident: justice for all, because we are all created equal; and, liberty for all, because we are all endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights. America’s fidelity to this creed is judged by history. Living up to it remains a constant challenge. But it invests our nation with spiritual purpose and – if we honor its precepts – a moral destiny.” (pp. xi – xii.)

The Nelson Mandela quote on the front of your Order of Service is challenging, but is it operational for us in our lives? “To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Does your freedom end where my freedom begins? Or, where my brain/intellect begins? Within this context, freedom becomes relative.

What about speed limits? When it comes to speed limits, I tend toward being a libertarian. If I am in control of my vehicle and moving with the flow of traffic, assuming there is traffic, why should an agent of government stop me and force me to pay a fine?

What is freedom to a libertarian? One of my favorite talk show hosts says that a libertarian is a Republican who wants to smoke dope and get laid.

What about Ayn Rand’s objectivism? Are we free to act in whatever manner will bring us, individually, the most gain? Hasn’t that philosophy helped create the greatest wealth inequality since the era of the Robber Barons and the gilded age of the 1920s? Can we be free and also venerate the commons? Or is freedom so individual that Ayn Rand and the Libertarians are right?

In contrast, John Locke, the British philosopher, Oxford academic and medical researcher said, “Where there is no law, there is no freedom”.

Then there were the cowboys and “rugged individualism”. You may remember the song -*Don’t Fence Me In* often sung by the Sons of the Pioneers, Bing Crosby, and Gene Autrey. Not that I am dating myself or anyone in the audience. However, if I remember correctly, it goes:

“I want to ride to the ridge where the West commences  
And gaze at the moon till I lose my senses  
And I can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences  
Don't fence me in”.

In many ways freedom requires one to let go and to trust. Think of the trapeze performers in a circus. The performer must trust completely and let go, spin through the air, and trust again that the “catcher” is there, well trained and ready. So, for us, the metaphor is clear. If you want freedom you have let go and trust. And, in those few moments, or few years, as we spin and trust, it can be exhilarating. But, make sure you know what you are doing and that at some point there is a catcher.

Ric Masten was a poet, a Unitarian minister, and a troubadour in the real sense of the word, and Marsha and I considered he and his wife Billie Barbara friends. They traveled the country, until his death a few years ago, speaking poems and truths from their RV. They made many trips to Dallas and both gave of themselves to the inmates in the Dallas County Jail system and to the school where Marsha taught.

I quote from one of Ric’s poems called *An Escape Artist.*

if freedom is nothing more

than being able to choose your own cage

as I suggest it is

then perhaps the fun comes

in being an escape artist

in recognizing the cage you are in

deciding how long you will settle for it

and then

when you want out

seeing how clever you are

at slipping through the wire

perhaps the good life

the full life

is nothing more

than every once in a while

pulling yourself through a hole

in the roof

standing triumphantly

looking down with a

hot damn

and then around

with an

oh shit?

And, so, consider how you think of freedom. Do you define freedom as fixed or relative? Does your freedom impinge on the freedom of others, and if so, how? In this age, in this time, in this beautiful place, is freedom a problem or a solution?

Amen