

## Perfect Freedom

*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Galatians 6:7-8*

It occurs to me on this Independence Day that most of us, nestled deep within the comfortable confines of 21<sup>st</sup> century American affluence, have no idea of the struggles and sacrifices it took to settle this land of ours. Maybe this story will help. In 1844, an ox-drawn covered wagon made its way along the Oregon Trail as part of a wagon train. The owner, a pioneer named Sager, and his wife, fell ill and both died. They left seven children, orphans in a wilderness. The youngest was an infant. The oldest was a thirteen year-old boy named John. At Fort Hall, a British trading post, the leaders of the wagon train decided to change course and head for California instead of Oregon. But John Sager remembered his father's wish to settle the family in Oregon. When the wagon train changed destination, the Sager children pressed on alone. After a while, John abandoned the heavy wagon and turned the oxen team into a pack train. Driving a cow to furnish milk for the baby, he led his siblings across the endless miles. The baby became feverish and wouldn't eat. The younger children cried and wanted to go back, but John led them on. Three hundred miles from Fort Hall, half starved and in rags, they came to a trader's cabin. He wanted them to stay, but John had heard there was a doctor who might save his baby sister. The doctor was nearly two hundred miles further on, across the Blue Mountains. John and his siblings trudged on. Summer was ending and it was growing colder. The oxen were dying and had to be abandoned. The eight year-old fell and broke her leg. John packed it in snow and put her on the back of the emaciated cow. He carried the three year-old on his back and the baby, who weighed next to nothing by now, in his arms. By now they were skeletons, all of them. But they went on until one day they staggered into the house where the doctor and his wife lived. The family took them in and nursed them back to health. They all survived. That's a true story. As I said, I often wonder if we have any idea of the sort of sacrifices which built this country?

What do we mean when we say the name, America? Is it simply a place to live - air, soil, people, landscape? Is there anything special about it? Why have people for decades and decades left their homes and families and risked everything to come here? Might it have something to do with freedom? Freedom is a precious gift, one that our forefathers and mothers paid dearly to secure for us. Freedom is something which is difficult to attain, and easy to lose. People will work for material goods, or position, or fame, or for lots of other things. But they will fight for freedom--to win it or defend it. In the late 1970s, hundreds of churches worked to resettle thousands of Vietnamese refugee families on American shores after the fall of South Viet Nam. I recall reading the story of one Vietnamese doctor and his family who were sponsored by a church and brought to America--but the church was in Anchorage, Alaska! These poor folks, natives of a country whose whole climate is intense tropical heat, suddenly found themselves in the midst of snow, ice, and cold. They'd never even seen it before. But the family settled in well, and after some months of living in their new home, a reporter asked the father if he didn't miss being warm? The father replied, "When I am free, then I am warm."

You don't have to whitewash the admittedly imperfect history of our country to nevertheless understand that the land we live in is the product of countless incredible tales of heroism, hard work, and sacrifice. And we take it all for granted--every single day, every one of us! Let's think for a moment about what the gift of freedom means for our lives.

FIRST OF ALL, FREEDOM CARRIES WITH IT RESPONSIBILITIES. It has become a cliché, but it is true: Freedom is not free. Writer John Marquand in his book *WICKFORD POINT* tells about a fictional family named Brill. The Brills are an unusual family. They are living off the lingering reputation of an ancestor, known as the Wickford Sage. The Sage was a famed New England poet. All of the characters in the Brill family are lazy, immature failures. Archie, the father, is a mural artist who never paints any murals. The young men are forever chasing after improbable jobs that won't amount to anything, and their sisters are forever chasing after rich,

old-family males who will never amount to anything either. But it is their mother Clothilde who epitomizes the family. She spends most of her life lounging on couches and asking, "Why doesn't anyone take care of me, darling? I get tired of doing everything for everybody. I have to take care of everyone else all the time. It would be nice if someone would take care of me for a change." The problem is that everyone in the family says the same thing, each in his or her own way. A whole family of people, each asking that all the others take care of them. The Brills had one thing many of us long for: economic freedom. They're old-money rich. But their freedom robbed them of their sense of responsibility. Instead of a sense of responsibility, they have instead an overwhelming sense of entitlement. And if anything will bring this republic of ours down around our ears, it's that, I believe. I think that's an inevitable outgrowth of a world which seeks so hard to cater to our every need. Every day, from every angle, someone else is trying to sell me a bundle of stuff or services that I just have to have. And the theme is always the same: convenience, luxury, fun. If you can possibly afford it, well, you deserve it. Trouble is, pampered people rarely develop a sense of responsibility. Without a sense of responsibility to our families, to our communities, to God, we waste away emotionally, morally, spiritually. Freedom carries with it responsibilities.

**FREEDOM ALSO CARRIES WITH IT CONSEQUENCES.** The freedom to drive a car carries with it the terrible weight of responsibility for the damage that a car out-of-control can do. The freedom to eat what you choose carries with it the responsibility to choose healthy foods and not to overindulge. Treat your friends and family like chattel and you will lose them. In other words, there is a moral law of cause-and-effect written into the fabric of the universe. Paul writes about freedom in our lesson from Galatians: "Do not be deceived," Paul writes. "God is not mocked: for you reap whatever you sow. For if you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit." (vs. 7-8) Freedom means that whatever values, activities, priorities, or kind life we cultivate, that's the kind of life we'll have. That's the sort of folks we'll turn out to be. We reap whatever we sow. If we sow the seeds of a good life, we reap a good

life. If we sow the seeds of a dishonest, immoral, or indulgent life, we reap accordingly. It is our choice. And that's why Paul counsels us: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up." Freedom carries with it consequences. One of the consistent themes of Paul's writings is the precarious balance between freedom and license. Paul knew that what often seems to be freedom leads not to wholeness and health but to disintegration and death. Doing whatever you darn well please, whenever and however you choose, is intoxicating at first, (ask any college freshman) but becomes a terrible taskmaster after a while, and the end of that kind of license is too often an empty and shallow life. Real freedom means knowing who you are, understanding who you belong to, and finding life in serving something greater than self, in pouring yourself out in service and love to others. I call it "becoming your own best self." That's what the Gospel gives us. The freedom to rest in the love of God. The freedom to know you are loved and treasured as you are, by a gracious God. Real freedom will never be found in things or power or license. Such things will sooner or later lead us away from being our own best selves.

But when you know who you are, and who God is, you can find the courage and faith to do good things, even great things. Do you know the name and the story of Harriet Tubman? Harriet Tubman knew just how precious freedom is. Her grandparents were members of the Ashanti people of Ghana, Africa. They were kidnaped from their land in 1725 and sold into slavery, ending up in America. Harriet was the third generation in her family to live in this country as slaves. But Harriet became a link to freedom, not just for her family, but for hundreds of other slave families as well. Harriet Tubman is known to history as the most famous conductor on what came to be called the "Underground Railroad." One fateful day, Harriet heard rumors that there were plans to sell her and two of her brothers to a chain gang. As if the back-breaking labors of the chain gangs weren't enough, they would probably never see their family again. So Harriet decided to escape, and she succeeded. She traveled mostly by night and hid in fields and barns during the day. There were designated stops, or "safe houses," along her multi-state trek at the homes of those sympathetic to the cause of freedom. Her destination was the northern

states, or even Canada, where many escaped slaves made their homes. Her life depended on her every step. The fact that this lone woman successfully traveled to freedom is remarkable enough in itself. But it is because she chose to return to the land of her birth time and time again to lead others on the Underground Railroad to freedom is astounding. She risked re-capture, beatings, jail time, and death itself to help others out of slavery. She and her charges suffered from hunger, fear, lack of sleep, extremes of the weather, and exhaustion but they still traveled on. She is credited with leading thousands of slaves to freedom. One quote from Tubman stands out in my mind. She once said (and this is my point), "I freed thousands of slaves. I could have freed thousands more, if they'd known they were slaves."

Think about that, will you? She said she could have freed thousands more, "IF THEY HAD KNOWN THEY WERE SLAVES." There are people who are slaves and don't even know it. They are slaves to dangerous habits, slaves to degrading lifestyles, slaves to self-defeating attitudes and self-centered values. They are slaves to comfort and affluence and materialism. They are comfortably conformed to this world. They would call themselves free, but the Bible would call them slaves. The bible says we should not be so conformed. You see, we live in a society that thinks it can defy the laws of sowing and reaping, but it is an illusion. Want a healthy body? Sow the right seeds for a healthy body. Want a happy marriage? Sow the seeds of a happy marriage. We are free. We can choose. But freedom has consequences.

The cost of freedom is high. For our forebears, it meant the sacrifices of settling a frontier, fighting our nations' wars, working to build and establish the towns and cities we take for granted. For Harriet Tubman it meant braving the dangers of the Underground Railroad. What does freedom mean to you? I hope it means a life of responsible living, a life lived in service to God and to others. Today, remember these things: Freedom is a precious gift, one which carries responsibilities. We must somehow be worthy of freedom if our country is to prosper. That means leaving no one behind, insuring that our country is not only free, but just in all its ways, that

the American Dream of freedom and dignity is available to all who seek it. And the abuse of freedom carries consequences, physically, spiritually, economically, environmentally, and nationally. We ignore that reality at our own peril. Most of all, remember that the truest freedom for every Christian is the freedom of a child of God, the wonderful good news that Jesus loves us and sets us free from the chains of sin and death, free to love God, free to serve one another, free to find the only sort of life finally worth living. The old collect in the prayer book describes it best when it says "O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom." It is, as I said earlier, the freedom to become "our own best selves," all in the process of becoming true servants of Christ, and of one another. That's freedom, this July 4th and every day. So may it ever be. Happy 4th, and God bless America.