

Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I seldom title my sermons, but today's sermon is entitled, "Free From What, For What?"

Today's readings give us a chance to talk about freedom quietly a week before...

advertisers and politicians can fill the airwaves w/ patriotic rhetoric...
designed to sell us everything from washers to wisdom from

Washington.

We call the 4th of July "Independence Day" and have good reason to celebrate.

We say this is the day we gained our freedom from British rule.

But are the words "freedom" and "independence" really synonyms?

I would maintain that, though we did gain our independence from England in 1776, we remained largely English for some time after.

If we had truly become something new in the 18th Century, "Americans," we wouldn't have viewed native Americans as the enemy.

No, we continued to think of ourselves as Europeans...

and held on to our hatred and fear of everything non-European for a long time.

Most of us still identify ourselves more readily with European culture...
than with the culture of the people who occupied these lands
before us.

We weren't free of the English in the 1770's; we merely became independent of them.

In the second reading for today, St. Paul tells us, "For freedom Christ has set you free.

Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5.1).

This sounds like something...

the framers of the Declaration of Independence would say; doesn't it?

But Paul goes on, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,

but through love become slaves to one another" (13).

Oops, it seems we've been made free only so that we can enslave ourselves.

This sounds ridiculous to our ears...

because we think of freedom and slavery as opposites.

The truth is that independence and slavery are opposites but, as I said,

freedom and independence are not the same thing.

One can be independent and yet not free, as was the case of the early Americans,

who were not free from European assumptions and prejudices;

and one can be free and yet enslave oneself to another,

which is what Paul is urging us to do.

We live in a society that worships independence.

We have long prided ourselves as being a nation of rugged individualists.

We love to hear stories of people who have bucked the system...

and overcome great odds to get what they want.

We constantly preach on the importance of gaining independence from parents,

siblings, and peers.

We say a person must be physically, intellectually,

and emotionally independent in order to be fully developed.

In other words, we feel we all must learn to act, think, and feel for ourselves.

So, what's wrong with this?

My week at camp has gotten me thinking about teenagers.

Teenagers are much maligned in this country.

This is unfortunate because teenagers, like canaries in a mine shaft, can reveal much about the health of a culture.

Before the age of gas meters,

miners used to take canaries down into the tunnels with them...

because if there were any poisonous gases present,

the birds, because of their delicate natures,

would die before the gases became deadly to the

miners.

The miners could then get out before they were put in any real danger.

In the same way, teens are more susceptible to the poisons present in any society.

They haven't hardened themselves yet, haven't built up immunity to the toxins.

If we look at how our teens are doing, then,

we can pretty well judge the health of our society and what's in store for us.

The problem is that for a long time teenagers are been dropping over right and left,

and no one's been paying any attention.

So, what is it that teens have to teach us?

As adults, our attempts at independence are generally balanced by our need for security:

we can't walk away from our domineering boss b/c we need to feel financially secure.

Teenagers, however, are less concerned with safety and more interested in autonomy,

so they provide for us good models of what happens when our inflated notions...

of the importance of independence are allowed to run their full course.

In the 1960's, particularly in places like the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco,

the streets were full of teens who had listened...

to all of their parents' complaints about their bosses and their constrained lives,

and chose to live their lives differently.

They decided to become completely independent; *they wanted to be free.*

Instead, they ended up...

under the control of the people who provided them with food and shelter.

They become slaves to their bodies that screamed out to be fed and comforted.

They were independent, but they were anything but free.

This lesson has been repeated over and over again in the last 50 years, as teens leave home and move out to live on the NY/LA/Seattle streets.

They are merely taking the lessons we teach of the importance of independence...

to their natural end.

And they end up in bondage...every time.

So, what is true freedom? First, let me say what it is not.

Freedom is not an escape from authority, from responsibility, from obligation.

Sure, authority figures, responsibilities, and obligations can feel inhibiting,

but to walk away from these...

is to be enslaved by our bodies, our minds, our passions.

In Paul's words, it is to be enslaved by the flesh, which leads to destructive sexuality,

drunkenness, the worshipping of false gods, hatred, strife, jealousy, anger,

quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, and so on.

All of these arise out of our indulging our bodies, minds, and emotions. Destructive sexuality and habits like alcoholism come out of our indulging our bodies...

rather than guarding and protecting them as one would any object of value.

When we indulge our minds,

they create false gods so they can feel in control of the universe.

When we indulge our emotions, they invariably lead us into conflict with others.

There is no true freedom...

until one is set free from the tyranny of one's own body, mind, and emotions.

Authority, responsibility, and obligation are the keys that turn this lock. We would all like to live lives full of what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

But to do this,

we must be first freed of the shackles of our bodies, minds, and emotions.

This is not accomplished through independence but rather through dependence...

total dependence on God.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are gifts from God.

Through Christ's sacrifice we have been set free.

Free from what?

From the tyrannies of the flesh: body, mind, and emotions.

Free for what? Free to become slaves to one another.

Jesus said that he came to serve not to be served...

and that those who would lead must become servants of all.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "For though I am free with respect to all,

I have made myself a slave to all” (9:19).

The irony is that only the truly liberated person can really serve others.

Liberation comes when one finally releases one’s own agenda and accepts God’s.

In our lives, we must strike a balance between security and independence,

but we need to make no compromises when it comes to freedom.

We are called to freedom,

but we are not to use our freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence/the flesh,

but rather, through holy love,

we are free to become servants of God and slaves to each other.

This 4th of July, let us dedicate ourselves to real freedom.