

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost - June 27, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

For Our Reflection:

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.

– The Declaration of Independence, United States of America 7/4/1776

Freedom Is A Rite

When I was a kid, I could hardly wait for emancipation. I knew that when I lived separately from my parents I would be free – free to eat dessert BEFORE dinner, free to stay up late – all night, if I wanted to. I'd be free from having to do the dishes, make my bed, play with my annoying siblings. I'd be free to pick my own fabulous friends. And I could drive a car, drink beer (though I'd NEVER drive drunk, of course), see racy movies – make them, if I was so inclined – become famous and spend my allowance any way I wanted to. Ahhhhhh FREEDOM!

Whatever happened to those dreams of life as a free adult? The world was in luck – I grew up – matured a tiny bit – and encountered the realities of adult homo-sapien survival. Although unsupervised and free to choose any number of behaviors, I became the source of my own allowance and the provider of my own sustenance. And WOW – are cars expensive!

Freedom looks very different from this side of the fence – as does my family of origin and my privileged childhood.

As a free adult – practicing a markedly free-thinking religion - in one of the freest societies on the planet, my understanding of freedom continues to unfold in a variety of ways. Today, my basic premise is that freedom is a sacred ritual, a divine R-I-T-E – and it has as much to do with one's mind as with one's environment. And it almost goes without saying – that the responsibilities that freedom engenders are countless - beyond the imagination of even an imaginative child.

In his circular letter to a number of recently founded churches in Galatia, Paul writes a wonderful ellipsis about FREEDOM:

- 1 For freedom Christ has set us free...
- 13 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.
- 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

22 ...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things.

“For freedom Christ has set us free...” for the purpose of “loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Paul, a devout – a fanatical – Jew, having experienced a personal, psycho-spiritual liberation through a personal encounter with Christ – actually comes full circle. He returns to the heart of Judaism – a heart that he feels has been buried under 613 laws and a burden of interpretation. That heart was where Jesus had pointed: love your neighbor as yourself. And that heart is liberating.

It is not a creed or a set of dogmatic principles. It is a state of mind and a form of behavior – a counter-response to human suffering which cannot be avoided.

Karen Armstrong, author of *A HISTORY OF GOD, THE BATTLE FOR GOD* and biographies of *MUHAMMED* and *BUDDHA*, has written two autobiographies. *THROUGH THE NARROW GATE* was her seven year journey into the convent and personal struggle to believe her way into union with God. *UP THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE* is her journey from convent to scholar in search of herself. And it is in her study of the world’s religions - in particular their texts – that she has found the freedom to be herself, to transform her own suffering into compassion – and find that long- sought union with God.

The final chapter alone is worth a semester of dialogue. But let me share a few of her ideas about human beings, God and freedom.

...in most traditions, faith [is] not about belief but about practice. Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed. (p.270)

In the course of my studies, I have discovered that the religious quest is not about discovering “the truth” or “the meaning of life” but about living as intensely as possible here and now. The idea is not to latch on to some superhuman personality or to “get to heaven” but to discover how to be fully human – hence the images of the perfect or enlightened man, or the deified human being...In my past, my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas true faith, I now believe, should make you more human than before. (pp.170-71)

All the world faiths put suffering at the top of their agenda, because it is an inescapable fact of human life, and unless you see things as they really are, you cannot live correctly. But even more important, if we deny our own pain, it is all too easy to dismiss the suffering of others. Every single one of the major traditions – Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as the monotheisms – teaches a spirituality of empathy, by means of which you relate your own suffering to that of others... [Rabbi] Hillel’s Golden Rule... tells you to look into your own heart, find out what distresses you, and then refrain from inflicting similar pain on other people. That, Hillel insisted, was the Torah, and everything else was commentary. This, I was to discover, was the essence of the religious life. (p.272)

...the influential twelfth –century Muslim mystic and philosopher Ibn al-Arabi [writes]:

Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively, so that you may disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God...is not confined to any one creed, for, he says, "wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah." (pp.288-89)

Compassion has been advocated by all the great faiths because it has been found to be the safest and surest means of attaining enlightenment. (p.296)

I have noticed, however, that compassion is not always a popular virtue. In my lectures I have sometimes see members of the audience glaring at me mutinously: where is the fun of religion if you can't disapprove of other people! There are some people, I suspect, who would be outraged if, when they finally arrived in heaven, they found everybody else there as well. Heaven would not be heaven unless you could peer over the celestial parapets and watch the unfortunates roasting below. (p.297)

...this habit of looking outside myself into the heart of another has put me outside the prism of myself. This ecstasy may not last for long, but while it lasts I experience an astonishing freedom... When I get beyond my [ego] for a few moments, I feel enlarged and enhanced – just as the Buddha promised. (p.298)

In summary, creeds and laws and theology are not central to spiritual experience. Compassionate action – a divine RITE is the essence of most great religions. In our Bible Study this week, Dot Blankley pointed out that freedom from the law is freedom to commit civil disobedience. And that is true when we define civil disobedience as a RITE. Civil disobedience at its best is not for the denigration of self or other. It is breaking a civil bond and appealing to a higher law or affiliation – one that is compassionate, respectful and liberating.

Last year, Norman Lear took his original copy of the Declaration of Independence – purchased on the internet - on a road trip. He published an accompanying book – WHY FREEDOM MATTERS, a massive collection of writings by a broad spectrum of writers - seeking to cut through the public rhetoric (especially in the wake of September 11th 2001) about freedom and return to the heart of the matter – the spirit of independence in the American experience. Maya Angelou's poem made my heart rise. A letter from a Viet Nam soldier brought me to tears.

The monologue by Michael Douglas in the film THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT – written by Aaron Sorkin – returns us to the heart of why freedom matters:

Everybody knows being an American isn't easy. America is advanced citizenship. You gotta want it bad, 'cause it's gonna put up a fight. It's gonna say, You want free speech? Let's see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil, who's standing center-stage and advocating, at the top of his lungs, that which you would spend your lifetime opposing at the top of yours. You want to claim this land as the land of the free, then the symbol of your country can't be a flag; the symbol has to be one of its citizens exercising his right to burn that flag in protest. Show me that, defend that, celebrate that in your classrooms. Then you can stand up and sing about the land of the free. (p.28)

The idea of freedom that we are talking about this morning may be a human right. But I have no doubt that it is a human RITE – acknowledging the divine in every person and creature and thing.

Freedom is embodied in compassionate action for the mitigation of suffering – motivated by a sense of interbeing.

It is civil disobedience in the face of injustice.

It is the battle of a nation for its OWN independence.

It is the collection of rituals performed by church and family and individuals to mark the emancipation of minors and their maturation into responsible, free adults.

It is an open pulpit and an ACLU Atheist teaching young people how to articulate their faith in dialogue with someone who thinks differently.

It is being and loving who we are – and loving others as they are.

Multiplicity or Trinity or Unity

Male or Female or Transgender

Separate Entity or Cellular Integration

God

Is manifest in compassionate action

And it is this RITE of passage

That truly makes us free.

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

June 27, 2004

10:00 a.m.

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

The New Century Hymnal or “Hymnal” has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

The Chapel Songbook or “CSB” is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

FOR OUR REFLECTION

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.

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WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship – A Time for Centering

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

**God is a circle whose center is everywhere
and whose circumference is nowhere.**

Come into the circle of love and justice.

Come into the community of mercy, holiness and health.

Come and you shall know peace and joy.

+ **Opening Hymn**

How Beautiful, our Spacious Skies

Hymnal # 594

+ **Opening Litany** (responsive)

One: I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,

Many: That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

One: It binds together families and generations, protecting against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority.

Many: This covenant is the charter and responsibility and joy of worship in the face of death as well as life.

One: I call that church free which brings individuals into a caring, trusting fellowship,

Many: That protects and nourishes their integrity and spiritual freedom; that yearns to belong to the church universal;

One: It is open to insight and conscience from every source; it bursts through rigid tradition, giving rise to new and living language, to new and broader fellowship.

Many: It is a pilgrim church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit.

One: The goal is the prophethood and priesthood of all believers, the one for the liberty of prophesying, the other for the ministry of healing.

Many: It aims to find unity in diversity under the promptings of the spirit “that bloweth where it listeth... and maketh all things new.”

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,

on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our debts

As we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil,

For Thine is the kingdom and the power

And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is a circle of mercy, an embrace of love, the urgency for justice.

Sung Response “Hallelujah... God be praised!” (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Scriptures

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Sermon

Freedom is a Rite

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God* Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response *In Solitude* Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

We thank you, God, for the freedom to give, for the desire to be generous, for the power of compassion that works a transformation in the human heart. Amen.

+ **Sending Hymn** *I Want to Be Ready* Hymnal # 616

+ **Commissioning** (unison) by Desmond Tutu (adapted)

In the enjoyment of our Freedom we recognize that:

Goodness is stronger than evil;

Love is stronger than hate;

Light is stronger than darkness;

Life is stronger than death.

+ **Sung Response** Hymnal #458

I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right.

O I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right.

**O I've got a feeling everything is gonna be all right,
be all right, be all right, be all right.**

+ **Postlude**

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is adapted from Israel Zangwill, Singing the Living Tradition #418

Opening Litany is by James Luther Adams, *Ibid.* #591