

## **A Fair Balance** (II Corinthians 8:7-14)

A man whose wife had been dead for some time found himself attracted to the new widow who had moved to town. She was a feisty, free-spirited woman, and before too long, she and the man had scheduled their wedding. The man and woman gazed lovingly at each other as the minister began the ceremony. Soon the minister was reading the vows. He asked the bride, "And do you promise to love, honor, and obey him, until death do you part?" But the minister's question was followed by silence. The bride wrinkled her brow and pursed her lips. It was obvious that she was in deep thought. Finally, though, she answered, "Love and honor, yes! Obey, no!" The groom looked at his bride. He looked at the minister. And then he shrugged as he said, "Oh, well, I guess two out of three isn't bad!" So they got married. He gave her all the freedom she wanted, and they lived happily ever after.

We're like that bride, aren't we? We want our freedom. We cherish our freedom. That's what the holiday this Saturday is all about. As Americans, we pride ourselves on being rugged individuals. We're proud to live in "the land of the free."

In his book Talking Straight, Lee Iacocca wrote about how funds were raised for the 100th birthday celebration of the Statue of Liberty. The donations came from all over the world. For example, a man from Poland sent \$2.00. Even though he would probably never see the State of Liberty himself, he said that "this beautiful symbol" of freedom was something he could dream about. Seventy-eight Vietnamese from a refugee camp in Thailand "passed the hat" and sent \$114.19 as "our humble share for the rehabilitation of her hundredth birthday." Iacocca commented, "That one floored me. These were people who had lost everything, everything but hope. And the Lady (of Liberty) was the symbol of that hope. They simply were pleading with us to 'keep the torch lit.'" And so this coming Saturday we will pause in the midst of our busy lives to give thanks and celebrate the freedoms given us in our Constitution.

But, friends, there's a power even greater than our Constitution that also

has a lot to say about freedom. And that power greater than our Constitution is our God. It seems that God has always been big on freedom.

One of the major events of the Older Testament is found in the Book of Exodus. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, when, according to Exodus 8:20, God sent Moses to Pharaoh to say, "Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may worship me." And when Pharaoh refused to free the Israelites, God sent 10 plagues on Egypt! The 10<sup>th</sup> and final plague was when God sent the angel of death. The angel of death spared or "passed over" the homes of the Israelites, who had been instructed to identify their homes by putting the blood of a lamb over their doorways. The blood of the lamb thus saved them; however, the first-born of the Egyptians all perished before Pharaoh finally gave the Israelites their freedom.

In the New Testament, Jesus took this celebration of the Passover, what could be described as the Jewish 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and gave it new meaning. At the Passover Jesus celebrated with his disciples on his last night with them, he said, "This is my body that is (given) for you. Do this in remembrance of me" and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (I Corinthians 11:24-25). These words of Jesus--words about remembering him, remembering his life, remembering his words--these words of Jesus speak volumes about the new freedoms God has given us.

**First**, remembering Jesus and all that he said and did to stress God's **forgiveness**, there's the freedom we Christians have from sins, from our past mistakes, from the past. As Paul expressed it in his Letter to the Colossians, "He has rescued us (freed us) from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14).

**Second**, remembering Jesus and all that he said and did to stress God's **love**, there's the freedom we Christians have to be our authentic or true selves. Much has been written about Coach Vince Lombardi of the Green Bay Packers. Few coaches have demanded more out of their players than did Lombardi. Yet when Lombardi was seriously ill in a Washington, D.C. hospital,

one of his former players, Willie Davis, boarded a plane in Los Angeles and flew to Washington just to spend a few minutes with his coach. Davis explained, "I had to go. That man made me feel I was important." And I think of what Sam Levenson once said. He said, "I pay my psychiatrist sixty dollars an hour and all he does is ask me the same question my father used to ask me all the time: "Who do you think you are anyway?" Remembering Jesus reminds us who we are: God's beloved, so loved by God that he gave his life for us. This realization indeed gives us the freedom to be our authentic selves.

Third, remembering Jesus and all that he said and did to stress God's **kingdom**, there's the freedom we Christians have to make the godly choices exemplified in Jesus' life. .

Now, I think we understand the freedom from our sins and the freedom to be ourselves. But I think it's a little more difficult for us to see choosing to do "the right thing," the things Jesus did, as freedom. So it's this that I'd like us to focus on for a few minutes this morning.

For a lot of onlookers probably see us Christians as being in bondage to our religion, having to follow rules and regulations. But with Jesus, we were actually freed from the 613 rules of Judaism--free to follow the law God has written on our hearts--free to choose to do or not to do what Jesus modeled for us.

Dostoyevsky put it so powerfully in his classic novel The Brothers Karamazov. He pictures a scene in which Jesus returns to earth. It's the 15th century, and Jesus comes to Spain. Spain is ruled by the church. Spain is held in the sway of the Inquisition, the greatest heresy hunt of all times. The bishops of the church set down the law of Christianity. And they kill all those who don't toe the line. And here comes Jesus. He comes to Seville, while the fires of the Inquisition burn the day's quota of heretics. And Jesus comes quietly. But people seem to know him. They're drawn to him, by his gentleness, by his kindness, by his love. And he places no demands on them. A blind man cries out to see him, and he doesn't stipulate a penance. He simply opens the man's eyes to the joy of sight. And as they walk along,

they come to the doors of Seville's cathedral. A procession of mourners is just leaving. They carry on their shoulders the coffin of a little girl, seven years old. And the mother throws herself at Jesus' feet and wails, "If it is Thou, raise my child!" And he does! And then comes the cardinal himself, the Grand Inquisitor. His eyes darken and his withered face grows black. He points a bony finger at Jesus, and he orders him arrested and thrown in prison. There in the dungeon, he confronts Jesus. He says, "You have no right to come back here and to mess things up for us!" He says, "You're destroying these people with your freedom! They can't handle it! They're like children! They need our rules and regulations! They need a church that keeps them huddled close in fear! Go away! Don't rock the boat! Take your freedom and leave!" And Jesus keeps silent the whole time. When the Grand Inquisitor finishes his tirade, Jesus waits for a long while. And when the Grand Inquisitor grows restless with the silence, Jesus finally stands. He says nothing. He only moves to the man's side. Then, with the tenderness of love and care, he softly kisses him. That's the only answer he gives.

Sometimes the church has not allowed Christians to exercise the freedom Jesus gave to do that which is written on their hearts. Out of a desire for control or out of greed, the church has usurped the freedom God has given us to make choices for building his kingdom.

But did you notice in our Epistle lesson for today how the Apostle Paul handled giving in the early church? He didn't say, "You must give" or "You have to do what I say." Instead, when the Christians in Jerusalem were suffering and needed help, he wrote the Christians at Corinth and said, "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love....For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich....I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need...." (II Corinthians 8).

In other words, unlike the church has been at times, God isn't a dictator. He

wants us of our own free will to imitate the example he has given us in Jesus. He wants us to use our own free will to do good and thus build his kingdom on earth. And nothing about God's kingdom is based on force. So God's kingdom on earth can only come when we use our freedom to willingly, unselfishly give away some of what we have to others who do not have as much as we have, so that there may be a fair balance. And herein lies the justice of our Lord. Herein lies the compassion of our Lord. Herein lies the forgiveness of our Lord. Herein lies the peace of our Lord. Herein lies the hope of our Lord. Herein lies the community of our Lord.

But, as I said earlier, this freedom of willingly sacrificing is difficult for us to grasp. Too many Christians are therefore like the woman in a true story Paul Harvey told. It seems that each year the Butterball Turkey Company sets up a hotline to answer consumer questions about preparing Thanksgiving turkeys. So this woman called to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in her freezer for 23 years! Yes, that's right. 23 years! The operator told her it might still be safe to serve the turkey if the freezer had been kept below zero degrees the entire time. But the operator warned the woman that, even if it were safe, the flavor had probably deteriorated, and she wouldn't recommend eating it. The woman replied, "That's what we thought." Then the woman added these words, "We'll just give it to the church."

Too many Christians do not understand what a precious and important freedom God has given them to use in bringing in his kingdom. They get the fact that they're free from their sins and that they're free to be themselves. But they don't get the fact that they're freed to choose to sacrifice some of what they have for those who have less--in response to those laws of justice, compassion, forgiveness, peace, hope, and community God has written on their hearts--that God's kingdom may come from a fair balance.

One man who did understand, however, was Simon Bolivar. When Simon Bolivar led the nation of Peru to independence from Spain in 1824, they pleaded with him to become their first president. He refused. He said that his work was the work of liberation. Others were better suited to the task

of governing. But still they wanted to honor him. So they offered him a gift of 1 million pesos. And he accepted the gift on one condition: that he could add monies from his own estate and then use all of that money together to purchase the freedom of the 3,000 individuals in Peru who were still slaves to other men. And this is what he did. Simon Bolivar used his God-given freedom of choice to give of what he had for others who had less, that there might be a fair balance.

And remember from your school days that Frenchman named Lafayette. Lafayette was a French general and politician who was sympathetic to the cause of the American colonists and thus supported George Washington in the American Revolution. But Lafayette's life was not only about political freedom. It was also about using the freedom God had given him to bring about a fair balance. You see, in 1783, the harvest in France was a poor one, but the workers of Lafayette's land still somehow managed to fill his barns with wheat. "The bad harvest has raised the price of wheat," said one of his workers. "This is the time to sell." Lafayette, however, thought about all the hungry peasants in the surrounding villages. Then he said, "No. This is the time to give." And that is what he did. He shared his wheat with those who had none. Lafayette used his God-given freedom of choice to give of what he had for others who had less, that there might be a fair balance.

This Saturday when we celebrate the freedoms given us by our Constitution, let us also pause to give thanks for the even more important freedoms our God has given us: freedom from our sins; freedom to be who we are; and the freedom to choose to act out of justice, compassion, forgiveness, peace, hope, and community--that there may be a fair balance--that God's kingdom may come. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; June 28, 2009