

**FREE TO DO THE RIGHT THING**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Elder Jason Rouse led the opening devotion at our June session meeting twelve days ago. He asked us to jot down freedoms we enjoy and appreciate as a result of living in these United States. My list included the freedom to worship, the freedom of expression, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom to travel. Jason then shared some thoughts about some of those very freedoms, against the backdrop of a 4th of July celebration. He read several scripture verses, including:

\* 2 Corinthians 3:17: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

\* John 8:31-32: Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

\* and Galatians 5:13, which I just read: “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.”

As we get ready to celebrate Independence Day on Thursday, let us be mindful of the freedoms we do enjoy, as Jason asked the elders to think about. Also, let us think about the kind of freedom we have in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

The Supreme Court of the United States finishes its annual session and recesses for the summer in late June or early July each year. During the 2018-2019 session, court watchers and many in the public were interested in how Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh would rule on cases. Now the same court watchers, members of the public, and politicians will keep tabs on which justice or justices might announce plans to retire and who might be nominated.

One of the most famous judges never to have been appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court was Judge Billings Learned Hand. Appointed by President Calvin Coolidge, Judge Learned Hand served on the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York and, later, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit. Although he had served admirably as a judge at different levels since 1909, Judge Hand was still relatively unknown to the general public. However, that changed after he made speech in Central Park in New York City in May 1944.

Judge Hand was invited to speak at the annual “I Am an American” day celebration of the newly naturalized U. S. citizens. His speech was fairly short, but his words were quickly reproduced in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *Reader’s Digest*. His fame and acclaim lasted until his death in 1961.

Judge Hand is sometimes referred to as the “tenth justice of the Supreme Court.” Although he never served on that bench, his opinions are often cited there.

In his speech in Central Park, Judge Hand said, “What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not the freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few; as we have learned in our sorrow.”

As he continued his speech, Judge Hand offered this explanation of liberty: “What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned but never quite forgotten; that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.”<sup>1</sup>

As we celebrate our nation’s independence on Thursday, Judge Hand’s comments from seventy-five years ago about true liberty are timely advice. Most of us are familiar with these words near the beginning of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” So many times, those unalienable rights seem to be understood by the citizens of our nation to mean “I can do whatever I want, and nobody can tell me any differently.” That streak of American independence can lead to self-interest at the cost of community. Freedom becomes a personal prize rather than a communal responsibility.

Understanding independence to mean “me-first” contradicts what the men who signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 understood true freedom to mean. In the final paragraph of our nation’s founding document, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed the independence of the united colonies and listed the powers of the newly free and independent states. The final sentence of the Declaration of Independence, interestingly enough, speaks of mutual dependence. It says: “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we **mutually pledge to each other** our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

The idea that true freedom means you’re free to become mutually dependent on one another is the same idea the apostle Paul expresses about our freedom in Christ. In his letter to the Gentile Christians in the region of Galatia, he writes: “For freedom

Christ has set you free; therefore, stand firm and do not again be subject to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Some early Christians, especially the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, accused Paul of spreading a gospel of libertinism. They were afraid Paul’s gospel could and would be heard as “You are free to do anything you want, as long as you have faith in Jesus Christ.” In fact, some Christians, especially those in Corinth, seem to have done just that. They thought faith in Jesus Christ set them free from any and all moral restraints.

Other Jewish Christian leaders from Jerusalem thought they had to balance out Paul’s gospel preaching by adding strict observance of the Jewish law as requirements for the Gentiles to become believers. But Paul would have nothing to do with that teaching of the law. He didn’t have a problem with God’s law. After all, it was **God’s** law. Paul did have a problem with the idea that you had to have faith + obedience to the law in order to be saved. To live that way, according to Paul, is to be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Trying to fulfill the law by our own best efforts and righteous deeds inevitably puts the spotlight on ourselves and leads to self-interest. Consider the Pharisee who prayed in the temple, “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income. Thank you, God, that I’m not like other people.”

So, there are two possibilities for living the Christian life, at opposite ends of the spectrum. One approach is to do whatever you want to do because, after all, “for freedom Christ has set us free.” At the other end is to toe the line, keep you nose clean, follow the rules, and somehow try to prove that we are righteous, fit, and deserving of God’s kingdom. Neither one of these approaches leaves room for faith in Jesus Christ and God’s grace. Neither one of these approaches to life comes close to the idea of true freedom in Jesus Christ.

In a sermon called “The Predicament of Freedom,” Rev. Joanna Adams says, “To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of ‘me, myself, and I.’ To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self and, as one who is wise has put it, to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service. **To be free is to be free for responsibility, not from responsibility.** I think of how Christ Jesus who had everything in the world going for himself — power, status, safety — how he chose, freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for the sake of the world. Now that is freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

On June 15, 1215, King John of England set his seal on a document at Runnymede, beside the Thames River. Four days later, the king and the barons accepted the final version of the Magna Carta Liberatum, the “Great Charter of the Liberties.” The Great Charter spelled out certain rights and became a symbol of liberty and the foundation of individual freedoms.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians has been called the “Magna Carta of the Christian life and faith. Paul’s message echoes that joyful shout, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last!” In the final analysis, the truth is we’re either servants of sin or servants of Christ. Freedom for Christians doesn’t mean standing on

our own, free and independent from all restraints, freed to do as we please and choose. When Paul tells us, “For freedom Christ has set us free,” he means free from sin, free to serve God, free to serve one another in love, free to do the right thing.

The freedom of the Christian life is like coming of age as a teenager or a young adult and finding out that the “absolute freedom” of being “adulthood” is full of responsibilities and choices and challenges. Freedom in Christ, life in the Spirit, means making choices, claiming responsibility, and, ironically, limiting ourselves and our freedom in love.

When Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, he begins with love, because love is the sum and substance of what it means to be a Christian. Sometimes it’s hard to know what love demands of us as Christians. We have to make hard choices, risky choices, perhaps even unpopular choices. But life in the Spirit means there is never a time when we Christians should do anything less than love God and our neighbors, to do the right thing with the complete freedom we have in Jesus Christ. That’s why it can be so hard to be and live in community sometimes. Love doesn’t always follow the rules we make up in life. The good news for the Christian community is that love covers a multitude of sins.

In his song, “Me and Bobby McGee” Kris Kristofferson wrote, “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose, Nothin’ don’t mean nothin’ hon’ if it ain’t free.” Paul’s gospel message proclaims just the opposite message — “Freedom in Christ is just another word for everything to gain.” In Christ, we are free from sin, free to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, free for the joy of restored relationships, free to be a community bound to one another in the love of Christ, and, most of all, free to do the right thing.

***Let us pray: Sovereign God, ruler of our hearts, you call us to obey you and you give us true freedom in Jesus Christ. Keep us faithful to the ways of your Son. May we use our freedom to follow in your paths and to serve your people. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Information about Judge Learned Hand is taken from several sources, including the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers at [www.criminaljustice.org](http://www.criminaljustice.org) and Wikipedia at [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned\\_Hand](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learned_Hand).

<sup>2</sup>Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams, “The Predicament of Freedom,” July 1, 2007 on Day 1 at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).