

FREEDOM

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, July 5, 2015

Is the Fight for Freedom Ever Really Over?

There has been a series of commercials on TV that have got me thinking. I wanted to preach about freedom, but not exactly about what freedom is – we can debate that; it’s a complex topic – but about the fight for freedom. These commercials basically show a military guy at a party or a picnic or a celebration, and they imply that this happy experience is made possible because of the ever-ongoing fight for freedom. There are many battles for freedom, of course, and they’re not all military, although that kind of fighting is certainly preeminent in our lives.

I purposely chose Psalm 48, with its martial words, for the scripture reading. King David, the most famous king of Israel, was a king of war, but this psalm is one of the many that speak of Jerusalem, which is a fascinating, beautiful, complex city – the center of three of the great faiths, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Note that the psalms often refer to Jerusalem as Zion because it is a city built on a hill called Mount Zion. This language is evocative of what is often said of the founding of America, right? A beacon, a light that leads all to it, a great light to the nations.

In part Psalm 48 says this about Jerusalem:

“Behold, the kings of the earth
assembled and marched forward

together. They looked and were astounded; they retreated and fled in terror. . . . Make the circuit of Zion; walk round about her, count the number of her towers [towers used for military purposes] Consider well her bulwarks [defenses]; examine her strongholds; that you may tell those who come after.

So what’s pictured here is a city and a God that cannot be conquered. A city on a hill, yet we know Jerusalem has been conquered and leveled many times in its troubled history. Peace and freedom are still dreams worked for and hoped for in Jerusalem and everywhere else in the world, where, sadly, war is endemic somewhere on the face of the globe.

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We have just celebrated our national holiday of freedom – Independence Day, we call it. Perhaps we went to a picnic – although some said you didn’t – and had sausage and hamburgers, even though the weather was a little threatening. But it stopped raining, and many of us watched fireworks, either in person or on TV. The people in my neighborhood decided to blow off some fireworks; I said “some,” but it went on for a very long time, and I had to keep turning up

the television sound to drown out the local noise.

I was watching Christmas movies on the Hallmark channel, of all things. I'm addicted to movies, as you know; I've admitted this many times. But now we're celebrating Christmas in July, so I had to turn up my TV. I mean it sounded like kids were lighting off canons. Finally the police came. Speaking of freedom, we're free, but we're not free to light fireworks off in New York State unless you're a professional pyrotechnic engineer.

Many of us on this Fourth of July have been especially joyous because it follows on the heels of the Supreme Court's decision to rule that marriage is for all people, not just a man and a woman. We're not going to call it gay marriage and straight marriage. We're going to call it just plain marriage, and it's about time, I'm sure. All marriage is now the law of the land. It's more freedom, but trust me when I say it is hard-won freedom.

Notice that your Bulletin includes the Statement in Support of Marriage Equality that was put out by the New York State Council of Churches on the announcement of marriage for all. Take a read because it's interesting. Art and I both feel that it's well-written, and we decided to enclose it with the Bulletin because it states that this is a matter of fundamental civil rights.

There are churches that will not agree to perform marriages between same sexes, but it has always been true that every pastor, no matter whether in session or board of elders or deacons, has the right to refuse a

marriage. There are some very evangelical or conservative pastors who have been saying they are going to be forced to perform gay marriages, and this is just not so. That has never been church rule; it has always been a matter of conscience and decision by the clergy. Basically it's a matter of hearts and minds with the pastor's approval.

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I have hanging in my office at Elizabeth Church Manor a poster, one of my favorites from a visit I made to Stockbridge, Massachusetts. I went to the Norman Rockwell museum there and saw the poster called "Freedom of Religion." It is one of the four freedoms that Rockwell painted for a series of covers in *The Saturday Evening Post* in February and March of 1943, based on a 1941 speech by Franklin Delano Roosevelt that laid out the four freedoms.

The posters are very famous, and some of you may remember the original covers. They really made quite a stir, and when they went on tour throughout the country in a War Bond campaign, they raised a lot of money.

Something about Norman Rockwell is that he's not critically acclaimed as an artist. It is sometimes said that he is too parochial, too right, too small-town, too idealized. But I think he is extremely gifted, and I was very moved by my visit to the Stockbridge museum.

The "Four Freedoms" were part of that visit, in addition to a series that Rockwell was

commissioned to do on racism, which of course is an issue that is constantly with us. One of the posters shows a little girl being escorted to school by state troopers. Remember that? He did a series on that too. These covers of magazines became posters, and they traveled a lot to help out in the war effort.

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When Roosevelt delivered his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941, eleven months before Pearl Harbor, this country had been through World War I, and there were many people who did not want to get involved in the conflict that was occurring with Hitler and what he and his troops were doing in Europe. There were plenty of people who said, “Don’t get involved.” I can understand that, yet Hitler had to be stopped.

FDR listed the four freedoms at the end of his speech:

“In future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

“The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world.

“The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his [or her] own way – everywhere in the world.

“The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic

understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world.

“The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction in armaments [Note that FDR wrote this in 1941!] to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.”

I like how he added the last four words. This wasn’t a speech just for America alone. It was intended for all people everywhere. We’re still waiting for it and fighting for it, aren’t we? We wait for these freedoms still, yet they are under more threat than ever. There are some few in positions of power who don’t want freedom for people under the sway of their rule, who don’t want children to go to school, who don’t even want cultural artifacts to remain intact.

The four freedoms became part of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, for which Eleanor Roosevelt campaigned strongly, saying:

“At all times, day by day, we have to continue fighting for freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom from want, for these are things that must be gained in peace as well as in war.”

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President Obama gave a very stirring eulogy at the funeral service for the Reverend Clementa Pinckney in Charleston, South Carolina. Did any of you watch that speech? It was amazing. It really was one of his finest. He had been thinking about grace, the President said, and there came a moment when he launched into the first verse of “Amazing Grace” and sang it, if a little off key, but it was brave and stirring, deeply moving.

I can’t remember ever having heard a President – well, President Clinton played a sax, but it was on a late-night TV show. That wasn’t quite the same kind of moment, you must admit. But when Obama started singing “Amazing Grace,” the organist chimed in and so did the congregation, on their feet, singing right along with him. It was quite an emotionally stirring moment.

During his eulogy, the President remarked:

“As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind. He’s given us a chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves.”

In reading the papers, you probably would have noticed that, during the past couple weeks, columnists have been reflecting on freedom, the fight for freedom, against racism, and for gay marriage. Columnist Leonard Pitts added these thoughts:

“Though he [President Obama] didn’t mention it, it seemed not incon-sequential that he said these things on the same day the

Supreme Court affirmed the right of same-sex couples to marry. It seemed fitting that he returned that night to a White House bathed in colors of the rainbow. One could almost see history making a great, wide turn toward freedom.”

I underlined that last sentence for good reason. Martin Luther King Jr. said almost the same thing:

“The arc of the universe is toward the good.”

Freedom comes in fits and starts. There’s a lot of fighting and working for it, and then all of a sudden a great advance is made. But a great advance doesn’t happen all by itself. It happens because there are people willing to make a stand and take huge risks to get arrested, to go to jail, to march, to protest, to write letters, to sit in pews and sing and pray for freedom. It can be slow and can take many years. Then suddenly it happens and takes a great, wide turn.

Charles Haynes, who is a columnist in our local paper, often writes about the First Amendment, which is his specialty. His most recent column was about the shooting at the Emmanuel A.M.E. Church under the headline: “Charleston Shows Fight for Freedom Is not Over.”

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So I wonder how you feel about the Confederate flag. That’s a battle still being waged. A woman from our area, I think, climbed the flagpole at the Confederate memorial monument in Charleston and took

down the Confederate battle flag but got arrested for that unlawful act. However, the governor of South Carolina thinks it should come down from the monument and has taken steps to accomplish that.

I recently read a poll that shows Americans are actually split on what the Confederate flag means. Forty-two percent said it's a symbol of Southern heritage in the Confederate movement and for those who died in the War Between the States. On the other hand forty-two percent said no, it's a symbol of racism, and it needs to go away.

I know where I stand on it, but I really didn't know how strongly I felt until I had an interview for a pastoral post in Webster, Indiana. It was a long time ago. Where's Webster? It's right above the border with Kentucky, so that was a different kind of country for me. Driving to my interview, I was on a dirt road. It was raining over much of the area, and eventually I came upon the small town of Webster, where I was to have the interview.

It was one of those interviews that don't go well from the beginning. It just didn't. The parishioners seemed to think one way, and I the other. I could tell we were talking on two different wavelengths. It was almost like I was a space alien, invited in because they needed to interview aliens, you know? I knew I wasn't going to be their pastor. And they kind of knew they weren't the congregation for me. But we went through the motions because we were there for the whole weekend. So I met with the committee, and I ate dinner with a bunch of people.

I took a tour of the town and saw that there were no coffee shops. I remarked aloud about this, asking, "There's no Starbucks at all?" "No. Who needs Starbucks?" It was really going badly. It was very Southern.

Everywhere in that town there were Confederate flags, including a bar and grill called the "Rebel Flag." They were all over the place, on almost every building, and on lots of cars and houses. And right in the middle of my interview, I just happened to mention my surprise that I had never seen so many Confederate flags.

Well, I knew then that I had blown the interview. That display of flags was not a good sign. I got an oppressive feeling that all those Confederate flags meant racism. I was from New Jersey (at that time), and they just looked at me. "Yes, you're clearly from New Jersey. There's absolutely nothing wrong with Confederate flags." So I pretty much got my plane ticket right then and there. It really did strike me that way. It didn't feel like freedom, with that flag flying all over town and with a bar and grill named for the rebel flag.

The Fight for Freedom Is Never Over

Let us take the time this morning to give thanks for all the brave men and women who have fought the fight for freedom in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, and on the home front. For all those who have marched on Washington, for those who have died in protest, for those at Stonewall and Charleston, and in Georgia and Alabama, and all across this great nation and the world, we give God great thanks.

Amen.