

Luke 4:14-21, Romans 7:15-8:2

Living Free
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Tomorrow, once again, we will celebrate our Independence as a nation. It was always a big, fun holiday for my family when I was growing up. In fact, when we moved away, I used to be more homesick on the 4th of July than I was at Christmas time. We have lots and lots of stories to tell about picnics, camping, friends and family getting together, making homemade ice-cream, having watermelon seed fights and of course, shooting off fireworks.

We had plenty of firecrackers during the day and then at night, instead of going to the big fireworks display in town, we always had our own, at home. We would all sit out on blankets waiting while dad and a couple of the other grown up men would set up the fireworks (or “night works” as we called them) and everyone would, in unison, Oooooo and Ahhhhhh over each one, no matter how good or poor it turned out.

We always got up real early and made blueberry pancakes on the 4th of July. One of our favorite stories to tell is about the time when my brother, David, filled his plate with stacks of blueberry pancakes, syrup, and lots of bacon. We always ate outside, even for breakfast on that morning, so he had just sat down at the picnic table and started to eat when the cat jumped out of the tree right smack in the middle of his plate! Talk about fireworks going off!!!! He didn't even need a punk to start the spark!

July 4th, of course, is a time when we remember the signing of the Declaration of Independence. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian clergyman, was among those who signed. We remember the part that says “all men are created equal.” We look back at our history, at the fierce fighting that our ancestors had to do for the sake of our freedom, and we are grateful, just as we are thankful and supportive of the many troops who are risking their lives today, for the sake of freedom.

And we must never forget that included in the freedom that we enjoy is freedom of religion. We do not have a state religion, a government that says we have to believe one way. While I think there does seem to be a push by some to be a certain type of Christian, we still have the right to practice our religion the way we think is right.

One of the tenets of the reformed tradition (which, of course, is what we are) says that we believe God is Lord of our conscience. That means no one has authority or power to determine what we believe about God. We do have a responsibility to study God's word and to seek His will through prayer and Scripture, through worship and the community of faith. In other words, we are free from powers above us ruling that we believe a certain way. I knew a pastor once, who said if the people did not agree with him, they were rebelling against God, because God spoke to him and not to them.

We believe that God speaks to anyone who is open and seeking God's voice. It comes in many different ways, but there is no special person it has to go through.

My own ancestors were persecuted for their faith. I was doing some family genealogy on the DeHaven side in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania a few years ago and found a book with a sketched picture of a Mennonite woman being buried alive. Anika DeHaven was, like many DeHaven's, being killed because of her beliefs. It was why they moved from Holland to France, to Germany and finally, to the United States.

When I worked for the Upper Room Ministries as the International Director for the youth movement, Chrysalis, I had the opportunity to travel to Lithuania where we started the first Baltic women's Chrysalis. I learned about how the Communists took over and the churches were closed. It was against the law to read the Bible or to have worship services.

By the time I went, in 2003, the communists were gone and the churches are opened back up, but they are basically empty because a whole generation of people had not gone to church. Even so, on that weekend retreat, I met people who had hidden their Bibles and risked their lives to get together for worship.

Imagine not being able to come here on Sunday morning to worship God together, or being told that we are breaking the law and could be imprisoned and executed, if we have Bibles in our homes! We often take our religious freedom for granted. In fact, so much so, that we tend to put worship way down on the list of priorities, and reading our Bibles as something we intend on doing, but don't always get around to it.

Paul talks about freedom in Christ in our Romans text today. I remember the first time I read this passage. If ever there was a time that I can say I experienced a conversion ... a real sense of God forgiving me, it was back in my early 20's.

There truly is not a time that I can remember when I did not believe in God or believe that God loved me. In fact, during the time of my parents divorce, I had a very strong sense of God actually holding me at night, when I could not go to sleep. I was 9 years old at the time.

But, as so many young people do, I made mistakes and headed down the wrong path after high school. I made some very unwise choices and while I knew the Bible and knew those choices were not the way a Christian would live, and while I believed in the good ways that I was taught by my parents and the church about Christian living, I still chose the other ways. What Paul says in this letter in Romans was exactly what I was feeling!

Part of me wanted to choose the right way, yet another part of me wanted to do what I wanted to do, and not what I knew God wanted.

I remember sitting at our table in the kitchen in this little brick house in Coffeyville, Kansas, and reading this text in Romans with my ears and eyes opened in a way they had not been before.

I remember feeling like I was reading about me and this amazing sense of grace and forgiveness and *freedom* that came over me at that moment when I read “there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death.”

For the first time, I got it! I really knew that God forgave me, because of Jesus Christ and I also knew that in Christ was the power to choose God’s will and the desire to choose His way. I had stepped off the path of righteousness for a little while, but in that moment, I turned and began walking on it again.

That doesn’t mean I never sinned again, but I found grace and forgiveness immediately as I quickly asked for it. I found strength to get back up and back on track right away. And the longer I did that, the less often I fell away.

I had been freed from my self! When we are bent to sin, we are giving in to our own selfishness. It’s all about “me” instead of truly loving and desiring to live for God.

As I had the opportunity to talk to hundreds of young people while I worked for the ministry of Chrysalis, I discovered that many of them related to what I said about this. So many yearn for that sense of forgiveness and promise of new life.

The thing is, it works the other way, too. There are people who have never made the bad choices I made in those few young years, who have had high standards all of their lives, who are nice, responsible citizens.

Yet, if they have not known their need for God’s grace, if they do not live that responsible life out of response to what Christ accomplished on the cross, they too, are not truly free. Our freedom comes through Christ, not ourselves, regardless of how good we might be.

Real freedom, whether we live in a free country or not ... even if we do not have freedom of religion ... real freedom is the freedom Christ granted us on the cross. In his dying, he bore our sins and freed us from the chains that held us captive.

And in the power of the One he promised to send us, the Holy Spirit, we are given wisdom to discern what God would have us do and the strength and courage to do it, and to resist evil.

That is freedom indeed. And with freedom comes responsibility.
I'd like to close with the creed and purpose for the Presbyterian Women (USA).
I've always thought it speaks so well of our freedom and the responsibility we
have in that freedom:

Forgiven and freed by God in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit,
we commit ourselves:

- to nurture our faith through prayer and Bible study
- to support the mission of the church worldwide
- to work for justice and peace
- to build an inclusive, caring community that strengthens the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise
of God's kingdom

Thank God for our free country, for our freedom to worship as we wish and
especially for our freedom from sin and death, given to us in Christ Jesus, our
Lord.

Amen.

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