

## **As Free As We Want to Be**

**Galatians 5:1; 13-15**

**(Independence Day – July 6, 2008)**

**“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with one 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 require that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”**

**Thrilling words! It must have been a wonderful feeling for those 56 men to sign that, thus to take a stand for equality, righteousness and freedom. It still feels good to think of them as our philosophical and spiritual forebears; to see ourselves as the inheritors of such stalwart determination not to tolerate anything that squelches the human spirit. It’s what this past Friday’s speeches and proclamations reverberated, and rightly so. Less often, however, is it recalled how far beyond mere powerful opinions and declaring opposition to political abuses these men took this. Maybe you recall the rest of their story. It isn’t as often told. Every signer was officially declared a traitor. Every one of them was hunted. Having to go into hiding meant forcible separation from their families. Nine died of wounds or hardships during the war triggered by their signing that declaration. Five others were captured and underwent exceptionally brutal imprisonments. The wives, sons, and daughters of yet others were killed, jailed, mistreated, persecuted or impoverished. One signer who survived lost all of his children and had to run from his wife’s deathbed to elude capture as his pursuers closed in on him as she lay dying. Seventeen of those who survived were left penniless. On and on go their stories of the pain, hardship and permanent insecurity that followed their going public with their convictions that summer day.**

**Moreover, and this is a crucial part of the picture, most of them were, at some point, offered a way out of their troubles. For what seemed like really minor acts of compromise and cooperation they were offered amnesty, immunity, freedom, rewards, the release of friends or family members, and, in a few cases, the return of their confiscated property. None of them wavered, however. That dramatically ups the price, doesn’t it, of patriotism, of standing on**

principle, of being a statesman or stateswoman? In fact, doesn't it sound almost too radical? Were we hearing this story without names and places; a story about a group of mostly younger men in their late twenties or early thirties, with families to support and with jobs and vocational responsibilities to handle, getting together and writing and signing an inflammatory petition calling for the actual overthrow of the government because its leadership was unresponsive, would we normally see these young men as heroic? How would we view a bunch of young idealists who did that; that is, who put up for grabs the well-being of their families, messed up their own futures, and unraveled the order and stability of the country? I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty radical for my taste.

Holding that thought for a moment, hear these words from Walter Wriston, once the chairman of Citicorp, who wrote: "My grandmother, in company with hundreds more, went west in a Conestoga wagon which by today's standards was unsafe at any speed. The environmental problems were enormous. They used buffalo dung to fuel their campfires. Half the people in the wagon train in which my grandmother traveled were massacred by Indians. (They traveled) along trails which today no government agency at city, state, or federal level would think of certifying as safe for travelers." He goes on to say, "The unremitting atmosphere of protective custody which now seems to surround us is producing a new kind of national mood...Our founding fathers were themselves adventurers and fighters who didn't hesitate to sign a document pledging "our lives," "our fortunes," and our "sacred honor" in pursuit of a future, even against overwhelming odds....Today, however, the idea if abroad in the land that the descendants of these adventurers should, as part of our national heritage, all be sheltered from risk, from uncertainty and from aggravation."

That stings, doesn't it? At least it makes me feel a little spoiled – somewhat spiritually flabby. Do you suppose Wriston might be correct, though, about a not-very-admirable kind of shift having come about in our expectations? Don't we hear possible echoes of it in some of the shrill, irritated, and petulant voices around us? Maybe not for everyone, but certainly for some there seems to be a belief that the freedom we've inherited and to which we're entitled is the right to be free FROM almost anything and everything unwanted or inconvenient or costly. "From" is the key word there: free FROM unpleasant people, free FROM difficult change, free FROM worry or danger, free FROM government, free FROM virtually all restraints. As to what freedom is FOR, that isn't so clear. If, as Wriston implies, the purpose of freedom has become little more than being free to be comfortable, free to be indulged, protected, secure, and narcissistic, it is so far from the vision that moved the forebears of our faith and our nation as to be downright embarrassing.

Some time ago the comic strip about the cat, “Garfield,” touched on it. Looking in the window of a pet store, Garfield sees all of the caged dogs and cats and decides to become their liberator. Donning the headband of a freedom fighter, he leaps into the store throwing open the doors of cages saying, “You’re free! You’re free! Go for it.” But the dogs and cats respond only with apprehension and fright, clinging, in fact, to the edges of their cages. Garfield is then shown thinking, “Hmnn, folks must not be heavily into freedom these days.” So the last frame shows Garfield slamming cage doors shut again, and with the same gusto with which he had proclaimed their freedom moments ago, is now saying, “You’re secure! You’re secure!” The freedom fighter has to become a security facilitator. Suppose if interviewed these dogs and cats in the pet store might well have explained that the self-evident freedom, that they’d inherited and cherished, is the glorious freedom to keep things exactly as they are, the freedom to be cared for and not to have to worry or adapt. There’s a freedom of sorts, perhaps, but hardly one over which to form parades or write songs.

As I hope you’ve already figured out then, this matter of freedom is really a spiritual issue, and is only marginally a political or historical or governmental one. Unfortunately it’s a matter in which people tend to talk a much better game than they want to play. I suspect, in fact, that we dwell upon freedom in political, institutional or constitutional terms, mostly to avoid dealing with it in ourselves, where it makes the most difference and is most demanding. The hard fact is, if you and I aren’t free at the core of us, we’re not free at all. Moreover, no declaration, constitution or legislation can liberate a person from internal captivities. And there are a whole bunch of those. If, for example, I can’t bear to have anyone upset with me, have anyone dislike me, be in any kind of conflict, then I’m not free. Those nice privileges or rights guaranteed me are then quite beside the point because I’m controlled by a cautious, bland, timid, morally bankrupt bondage to others’ opinions of me. If I would not-do not know who I am apart from my position or my money or that which I own, there too, I’m anything but free. I’m owned by the very things that I think I possess. The signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged their lives, possessions, everything, to their untested vision that was little more than a dream.

There’s also no freedom for me if I can’t bear to fail, can’t stand to be in error, am terrified of ever losing face or looking foolish. If you recall the old movie, *Zorba the Greek*, there was a wonderful line at the end. It was after the elaborate-but-hairbrained apparatus built by Zorba and others to transport timber down the mountain tore itself apart. It collapsed in an ignominious heap when they tried to use it. Zorba starts laughing at the absurd spectacle, but his boss is heartsick-devastated. Then Zorba says to him, “Boss man, I’ve never loved anyone as I love you, but there’s one thing you lack – the little madness to be free!” Zorba was right.

There's no freedom without that little madness of which he spoke. The tyranny of needing the certainty of success, and total protection of our egos is an exacting kind of slavery. It'll control you and me with a totality that would leave the most strident dictator or tyrant drooling with envy.

A more subtle way in which this is at stake is this: I have compromised my freedom as an independent son or daughter of God if I'm allowing others to formulate my opinions, to shape my beliefs and to manage my indignation for me. It's a seductive – even respectable tyranny, but as deadly as the rest of them. If my convictions, perspectives, concerns have to be validated for me by a James Dobson, a Bill Moyers, a Larry King, or a Rush Limbaugh, or any other authority figure, then, without my realizing it, some “soul-selling” has taken place.

There are plenty of other examples of where one's real freedom can be long gone quite apart from legislation, regulation, taxation, and rights. It's not that those political, social and ideological freedoms aren't important. They do make a difference, but NOT THE REAL difference. You can put a truly free-spirited person in the most repressive country in the world, and that person will still be free -- even if it kills him. Unfortunately the opposite is just as true. That's the irony of the obsession some have over external freedoms they think they're losing or to which they think they're entitled. Again, when one has to come to be ruled by his own standard of living, or when he's willing to pay any price to avoid change or to feel secure, or when he allows his thinking to be dominated and shaped by a political party, religious group or his vocation, he has far more to worry about than the latest irritating piece of legislation. However ill-conceived, aggravating, or intrusive is some of that which nibbles at our external rights and freedoms; it's not nor will it ever be where the issue of our real freedom is decided. Societies, governments and institutions, by their very nature are never really very free (ours included). ONLY PERSONS are free – IF, that is, they're willing to pay the price of living and acting that way.

So let's be very careful and thoughtful during this Independence Day period. As appropriate as is our giving thanks this past holiday for those free spirits that blessed our past, it could end up another empty exercise in nostalgia-masquerading-as-patriotism. That's all it might be if celebrating, remembering and reflecting doesn't send us INWARD to be very sure that OUR OWN minds and spirits are sufficiently free that God will be able to use us to bless the present.