

Freedom (Part One)

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free”

Reflection 18 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Most of us want freedom. We are Americans or we are people who immigrated to America, and that means we value freedom. In fact, the American story can be told as the story of freedom, as it was again in last year’s Oscar-nominated movie “Selma,” as time and again marchers attempted to cross that now iconic bridge in Selma, Alabama. So it has been from the founding of our nation. America begins with the miracle in Philadelphia in 1776 when farmers, tradesmen, craftsmen, lawyers and doctors gathered in Philadelphia from thirteen British colonies in North America and, at great risk of their own lives, crafted a document that would change the world, “The Declaration of Independence”, with its immortal words: “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 from the very beginning freedom has been important in our nation. It’s at the heart of our government, the heart of our culture, the heart of our national character. Our national vision centers on freedom, on liberty, understood primarily as the freedoms enshrined in our Bill of Rights, such things as freedom of religion, freedom of speech and of the press, freedom to peaceably assemble, and based on a limited role for federal government, a free market with a minimum of regulations, and the almost absolute sanctity of private property, the occasional case of eminent domain notwithstanding. This understanding of freedom has made this nation an economic powerhouse and has lifted America to long decades of world leadership.

And yet none of this is what freedom means for a whole lot of people today. Back on the 2010 New York Times bestsellers list was a book by Jonathan Franzen called *Freedom*. It’s the story of Patty and Walter Berglund, their children, Jessica and Joey, and their friend Richard Katz, an out-there rock musician and Walter’s best friend and rival, and their life struggles across the past twenty years or so of the American experience. Oprah, I’ve been told, considers this the best book she’s ever recommended. In the end, it’s about freedom, hence the title. It takes a while to develop this theme, but it’s about freedom – what freedom really means in America. What it finally concludes is that freedom in America is the right “to mess up your life whatever way you want to.” The freedom to mess up your life whatever way you want to. Only in the book the word isn’t “mess.” Those of you reading closely enough may deduce the original here, and the original in this case has some merit. For many Americans I think that’s right. Freedom as it’s understood by many people in this country is not the vision of the Founding Fathers. It’s not rooted in unalienable rights endowed by our Creator. It’s the right “to mess up your life whatever way you want to.”

So for this reason and others there is this huge paradox at the heart of America. For all the talk of freedom in America, many Americans do not feel free. Instead they feel trapped, sometimes more trapped than many in lands less politically free. They feel trapped, trapped in unrewarding jobs, trapped in unloving marriages, trapped by their

own bad decisions, trapped in self-defeating behavior patterns, trapped in addiction, trapped by their emotional neediness and incessant craving, trapped by their attachments, their notions that without a particular person, or a particular thing, or a particular outcome they just cannot be happy, trapped even by their lifestyles – their mortgages and indebtedness, the way they live right up to and beyond their means, and trapped always by their fear of death. And so they hunger for freedom, to really feel free. And connecting to something we said in last week's reflection, they do not want their churches to tell them exactly what to believe about everything.

So we need to go back, I believe, to the timeless truths of Jesus and Scripture and reconsider what real freedom is. Is it, first of all, really something based in limited government and property rights? Economics is important. It's at the center of how we live and structure our lives. But is freedom primarily an economic construct? Or even a political construct?

The Bible talks about freedom a lot, and in many different ways. In one of the great classic texts of our civilization, Jesus once said – this in John 8:31-32 – “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” His listeners that day protested (just as we would have), “We have never been slaves of anyone,” to which Jesus replied, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Anyone who acts in destructive or self-destructive ways restricts her own freedom. Anyone who devotes her life to what it is not hers to have loses her own freedom. Anyone who is obsessed with anything or anyone loses her own freedom. And certainly anyone who is addicted to drink or drugs or sex or work or sports or whatever loses her own freedom. Anyone who is stuck in any of these ways is not free.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.