



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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FREEDOM ... A PRECIOUS GIFT
Galatians 6:1-10

Most of you can remember Art Linkletter and his TV segment, Kid's Say the Darndest Things? Once they were questioned about what they liked about the United States. Here are some of their answers:

Jackie, age 9: "We've got more stuff and things in America than anywhere in the world. We have pizza as well, and it don't grow any other place on earth except maybe Italy."

Heather, age 5: "America is the best because people in other countries are smaller and they get trodden on easy."

Elliott, age 9: "Everybody wants to live in America because we own the moon. The President bought the moon from God for a million dollars and I saw him send spacemen up on T.V."

Tina, age 6: "America is great because you get the best friends here. The last time I counted, I had a thousand friends and I don't know anyone with as many friends as me."

David, age 9: "America is great because it's bigger and has more supermarkets. I don't know much about other countries except Russia. I know there's a lot of Russians in Russia."

Jonathan, age 8: "Other countries aren't free like America. They won't let you go to church and if you do, they throw you in prison and whip you."

Sean, age 9: "America is great because they have the most plumbers in the world. That's because we've got more tubs. I want to be a plumber like my uncle ... cause he's real rich."

And Lew, age 6, brings us back down to earth. Asked what he liked about America, the little boy replied, "What's America...?"



I know I speak for everyone here on this Independence Day when I say that we as a nation thank God for our freedom. Freedom IS a Precious Gift ... a gift that our fathers and mothers paid dearly to secure for us. Have you ever thought about what it took to settle this land? I'm talking way back, now. Karen and I drove from Ohio to California when I attended seminary ... we thought that was far, but...



In 1844, an ox drawn covered wagon made its way on the Oregon Trail as part of a wagon train. The owner, a pioneer named Sager, and his wife became ill and died. They left seven children. The oldest was John, a boy of thirteen; the youngest was just a baby.

At Fort Hall, a British trading post, the leaders of the wagon train decided to head for California instead of Oregon. But John Sager remembered his father's wish to settle the family in Oregon. When the wagon train changed destination, the Sager orphans went on alone. After a while John abandoned the heavy wagon and turned the oxen into a pack train. Driving a cow to furnish milk for the baby, he led the children west across the endless miles. The baby became feverish and could not eat. The younger children cried and wanted to turn back. Still, John led them on.

Three hundred miles from Fort Hall, half starving and in rags, they came to a trader's cabin. He wanted them to stay, but John had heard of a doctor who might save his baby sister. The doctor was two hundred miles farther on, across the rugged Blue Mountains. John and his siblings trudged on.

Summer was ending and it grew cold. The oxen were dying and had to be abandoned. The eight-year-old girl fell and broke her leg. John packed it in snow and put her on the back of the emaciated cow. He carried the three-year-old on his back. The baby in his arms weighed almost nothing at all. By now they were skeletons ... all of them. But they went on, until one day they staggered into the house where the doctor lived with his wife. These kind people adopted the children and nursed them back to health.

What does it mean to be an American? It means that others have given their lives to create this "land of the free and the home of the brave." We dare not take their sacrifices for granted. Let's think for a moment about what this Precious Gift of Freedom means for our lives.



Let's talk about the RESPONSIBILITIES and CONSEQUENCES of Freedom. First the RESPONSIBILITIES.

It has become a cliché, but it is true: Freedom is not free.

Writer John Marquand in his book Wickford Point tells about a fictional family named Brill. The Brills are an unusual family. They are living off the inheritance of their ancestor John Brill, known as the Wickford Sage, a stuffed-shirt New England poet who had died very wealthy.

All of the characters in the Brill family are pretty much worthless spendthrifts. Archie, the father, is a mural artist who never paints any murals. The young men of the family chase after improbable jobs that never amount to anything, and their sisters, well they're always chasing after rich, old-family males who will never amount to anything either. The Brills are bound to each other by unhealthy dependencies, but it is their mother, Clothilde who epitomizes the family. She spends most of her life lounging on couches and asking, "Why doesn't anyone take care of me, darling? I get tired of doing everything for everybody. I have to take care of everyone else all the time. It would be nice if someone would take care of me for a change." The problem is that everyone in the family says exactly the same thing ... each in his or her own way.

The Brills have one thing many of us long for: economic freedom. But their freedom has robbed them of their sense of responsibility. We often criticize today's poor for their sense of entitlement ... their sense that the world owes them a living. We ignore the fact that the wealthy have always felt that way.

Pampered people rarely develop a sense of responsibility. Without a sense of responsibility to our families, to our communities, to God, we waste away emotionally, morally, spiritually.

Freedom carries with it RESPONSIBILITIES.



Freedom also carries with it CONSEQUENCES.

The freedom to drive a car carries with it the terrible weight of responsibility for the damage that a car out-of-control can do.

The freedom to eat what you choose carries with it the responsibility to choose healthy foods and not to overindulge.

Paul writes about freedom in our lesson from Galatians: "Do not be deceived," Paul writes. "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit."

Freedom means that we reap whatever we sow. It is one of the primary laws of life. If we sow a good life, we reap a good life. If we sow a life of excess and poor choices, we reap accordingly. But it is OUR choice. That's why Paul counsels us with these words: "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

Freedom carries with it CONSEQUENCES. One of the consistent themes of Paul's writings is that precarious balance between freedom and license. Paul knew that what often seems to be

freedom leads NOT to wholeness and health but to disintegration and death. And many people lose the things most precious to them because they cannot handle the gift of freedom.



Harriet Tubman knew how precious freedom was.

Harriet's grandparents were members of the Ashanti people of Ghana. Her grandparents were kidnapped from their land in 1725 and sold into slavery. Harriet was the third generation in her family to live as slaves. But Harriet Tubman became a link to freedom, not just for her family, but for hundreds of other slave families as well. Harriet became the most famous conductor on what has come to be called the "Underground Railroad."

Harriet's flight from slavery was sparked by rumors that there were plans to sell her and two of her brothers to a chain gang. As if the backbreaking labors of the chain gangs weren't enough, they would probably never see their family again. So Harriet decided to escape. She wandered by her parent's cottage that night, quietly singing a gospel tune about being "bound for the Promised Land." It was a secret code slaves used to signal that they were planning to leave.

Harriet Tubman's escape that night was successful. She traveled mostly by night and hid in fields and barns during the day. There were designated stops along her multi-state trek at the homes of those sympathetic to the cause of freedom. Her destination was the Northern states, or even Canada, where many escaped slaves made their homes. Her life depended on her every step.

The fact that this lone woman successfully traveled to freedom is remarkable enough in itself. The fact that she chose to return to slave country hundreds of times to lead others on the Underground Railroad to freedom is astounding. She risked recapture, beatings, jail time, and even death to help others out of slavery. Harriet and those she helped must have suffered from hunger, fear, lack of sleep, extremes of the weather, exhaustion ... but they still traveled on.

The last leg of the journey into Canada required crossing a flimsy bridge, made of wooden planks, suspended over the Niagara River close to the Falls. Many times those in her charge, upon seeing the bridge were ready to turn back! It was at those times that Harriet implored:

"Children, if you are tired, keep going; if you are scared, keep going; if you are hungry, keep going. Freedom lies ahead!"

And Harriet Tubman herself kept going, risking her life to lead literally thousands of slaves to freedom.

The March 1997 issue of EBONY magazine contains a telling quote from Ms. Tubman. She once said, "I freed thousands of slaves. I could have freed thousands more, if they had known they were slaves."

Did you hear that? She could have freed thousands more, "IF THEY HAD KNOWN THEY WERE SLAVES." There are people who are slaves and don't even know it ... slaves to dangerous habits, slaves to dehumanizing lifestyles, slaves to self-defeating attitudes and slaves to life-denying practices.

We live in a society that thinks it can defy the laws of sowing and reaping ... but it is an ILLUSION. Want a healthy body, then sow the right seeds for a healthy body. Want a happy marriage, then sow the seeds of a happy marriage. Want a multiplicity of friendships, then sow the seeds of love.

We are free. We can choose. But freedom has consequences.

But there is one thing more to say about FREEDOM.



Our Ultimate Freedom is found in an example ... Jesus Christ's willingness to go to the cross. Christ stood against everything that was wrong with his world at the time. He opened himself to love the unlovely, to welcome the outcasts of society, to proclaim freedom to the captives of a repressive religion and government. And because he did that ... they nailed him to a cross. That's why Paul wrote just a few verses later in this same chapter: "May I never boast of anything except the

cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Verse 14) Paul understood the cost of freedom ... freedom from years of living an unjust, destructive life. After his conversion on the road to Damascus to become a follower of the way, Paul was imprisoned four times ... the fourth in a Roman prison where he was finally put to death. Jesus' message of love and acceptance became Paul's message of love ... "for the greatest of these is LOVE" he declares in 1 Corinthians 13. Yes, Paul understood the cost of freedom ... the freedom to love and to finally live. How about YOU? Do you comprehend the cost? Jesus said, "Take up your cross daily and follow me."



Maya Angelou tells of Tom, a slave in the pre-Civil War South.

Tom's owner allowed him to take jobs off the plantation at night, on holidays, and on weekends. He worked hard all day at his own plantation, then walked several miles into town and worked there to earn money. After a few hours of sleep, he would rise and repeat the process. This went on for years, and Tom saved every penny. He didn't marry, didn't spend the money ... saved it all.

After he had stashed away a thousand dollars, he went to the owner of the plantation and asked how much he was worth. The owner said most slaves brought between \$800 and \$1,200, but since Tom was older and had no children, if he wanted to buy his own freedom he would let him go for \$600. Tom thanked the owner and returned to his cabin. He dug up the money, and as he fondled the cash in his hands, he began to remember how long it had taken to earn it, how hard he had worked. Finally, he put it back into the hiding place, returned to the owner and told him, "Boss, freedom's jus'a little too high right now. I's gonna wait tills the price comes down."

The COST of FREEDOM is HIGH.

- For John Sager's family it meant the constant threat of suffering and death on the Oregon Trail.
- For Harriet Tubman it meant dangers on the Underground Railroad.
- For Christ it meant death on Golgotha's hill.

What does FREEDOM mean to YOU?

I hope it means a life of responsible living.

A life lived in loving service to God and to others.

For you see, FREEDOM is a PRECIOUS GIFT.

Amen and Amen.