

Let Freedom Ring
Matthew 4:1-11
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 5, 2009

Since this is the July 4th weekend, it isn't unusual for Sermons to explore the themes of faithful discipleship along with the celebration of our freedoms.

Our Revolutionary War was fought because the colonies wanted to be independent, so we severed our umbilical cord with the mother country and began the struggle for freedom.

Not surprisingly, if you look at the history of this period with the eyes of a psychologist you can see similarities between the struggle with the thirteen colonies and Great Britain and the struggle between every child who ever lived and their parents.

Think about it. The Mother Country, England, gave the colonies birth then carefully nurtured her thirteen children, until that point when her ungrateful offspring decided the Mother was becoming too meddling, so they declared independence. Doesn't this mirror the human experience?

We're born helpless into the world. During the first years from infancy to adolescence, we must be carefully nurtured, fed, clothed and most of all loved if we are to become well balanced and healthy adults. But throughout this "bringing up" time, parents look for flashes of independence in their children. Sometimes the children want to be supervised, other times they want to be "grown up" and the "Mother please, I'd rather do it myself" syndrome kicks in, because they want to be independent on their own terms. This is when parenting skills are sorely tested as the wise parent seeks to find that delicate balance to keep the child in check and give just enough independence so the child can mature to experience life to the fullest.

Our parents' goal was to raise us up to be independent, healthy and loving human beings who are equipped to handle the challenges of life. Unfortunately, there are no perfect parents and therefore, no perfect children. All families are to some degree dysfunctional. That's the modern way of saying all families are tainted by original sin.

Original sin simply and bluntly means we are damaged goods. We are Adam and Eve's children raised outside the Garden of Eden. O yes, it's a real place. Do you know where to find it?

A seminary professor once surprised his students when he claimed he knew the exact location of the Garden of Eden. "What?" gasped his students. "32 Maple

Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio," the professor insisted. "It was there on Maple Avenue when I was a boy; I stole money from my mother's purse, ran to the candy store, bought a chocolate bar and ate it as fast as I could. Afterward I was so ashamed I ran back to Maple Avenue and hid in the closet. My mother found me. "Why are you hiding? What have you done?"

Where's your Garden of Eden? Maybe you can remember the time and place you, like Adam and Eve, abused your freedom and chose wrong over right. It's all part of being human. We're born into sin. Of course, you didn't choose to be born into sin. So, it's unfair for someone to blame you for something beyond your control. In fact, the only one whose opinion really matters, God, doesn't blame you at all. Nevertheless, we are still held accountable for everything not beyond our control, because God gives us the gift of free will. The problem is we're always tempted, so our derailed pursuit of happiness takes us to the wrong places. And yet, if you're serious about finding happiness in the right places you can use your freedom to make right choices. And the way to make right choices is through Jesus.

Look closely at the story of Jesus in the wilderness and you realize it's a retelling of the story of Adam and Eve but this time Jesus makes the right choices. But don't underestimate the power of temptations. He wasn't play acting. He struggled as much as, maybe more than, we ever will. At the same time as we see Jesus win out, we're given a rare insight into the very same dynamics we're up against whenever we face temptation. Very quickly let's review the three major temptations Jesus endured.

First the devil said "...command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus was fasting and hungry. Physical hunger leads to spiritual vulnerability and heightens the need for security. Being clothed and fed, having a place to live, are all symptomatic of our very real need for security. Satan plays on this need. The urge for survival and security is our strongest instinct. If we don't have what we need to live, or die. But because of our original sin we over-compensate in the frantic rush to meet our needs and the quest for security becomes obsessive.

The need to feel secure is never satisfied if we look for our security in all the wrong places. When you worry solely about "what you will eat and what you will wear" as Jesus pointed out in the Sermon of the Mount, then you do so at the expense of your ability to find your ultimate security in the presence of God.

Satan was tempting Jesus not to trust that God will provide. But Jesus' answer to Satan reflected his total trust. When Jesus counted, "Do not live by bread along..." Jesus was really saying "It's not good for you to try to make or create your own security. It's only an illusion. Instead, put your trust in the only security that lasts, the grace of God."

Next Satan took aim at Jesus' ego. "...throw yourself down from the top of the temple. Force God's hand. Make him send his angels to save you. It will be quite a show. The people will love you, you'll be a super star."

We were created to be God's children. But again we aren't satisfied simply being God's children. We think we deserve more so we have fragile egos. Ego is simply the Greek word for "I." "I want to be loved and esteemed! I want to be noticed and celebrated! I want to be the center of attention!" Sometimes folks who are full of themselves are said to have strong egos. Actually the reverse is true. Their self image is really weak. So, these poor souls always need to prove their self worth. "Look what I can do." "Look at how much money I make." "Look at how much I

own." "Look at how important I am." All this bluster is just a vain attempt to cover up their insecurities.

Satan knew what he was doing as he probed Jesus humanity. "Don't hold back Jesus, let them all know just how wonderful you really are." Again Jesus resisted. Jesus' response, "Do not put your God to the test," was just another way of saying "don't try to improve on who God made you to be, instead, simply be your true self and enjoy who you are, walk with me and I'll show you how to love yourself, and thank God that you are you."

Satan still had one more trick. This time he tempted Jesus with the lust for power. Showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Satan promised, "All this will be yours if you worship me." The desire for power and the control over our destinies is not limited to the Hitlers of this world. Because of original sin deep in each human heart is the desire to be in control of other people and events. All of us to some degree do it, some are much better than others. Having power over co-workers, family members, even God can become major pre-occupations. Clawing your way to the top, even if it means stomping on others is the sick and broken way of the world. Had Jesus given into this temptation than the doctrine of free will and the way of servant hood would have both been dead letters.

But again Jesus resisted. The Garden of Eden's mistakes weren't repeated. So Satan's triple assault on Jesus' human need for security, self worth and control went down in flames.

Unfortunately Satan is more successful with us. But Jesus came to let you know despite your original sin, your need for security, self worth and control can all be met in the mystery that is God.

What can we take from this scripture? You can find your ultimate security and discover your true identity. You can overcome your obsession for control. You can turn away from all the culture's false prescriptions for happiness and turn to the

Kingdom's guarantee for happiness in Jesus Christ. What's more God has already given you the freedom to make the right choices.

As you walk with Jesus and grow in the faith you will have the increasing desire to declare your independence from your false self that always falls for the culture's false promises for happiness. Always remember, Jesus came into the world to save you from the bondage you're in, so you can be free to be your true self, who God wants you to be.

Believe me your cell door has been unlocked and opened wide. Leave behind those claims that keep you tangled up in your vain and obsessive search for security, self esteem and control outside of God's grace. And then step out and be with Jesus, walk on that journey that brings you to your true self and let Freedom ring.

Let us pray.