

## “Where Faith Meets Freedom”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens  
based on the theme, “FAITH AND FREEDOM”  
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
July 5, 2009

### Romans 8: 1-21 [ NRSV ]

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup>because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup>For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, <sup>4</sup>in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

<sup>5</sup>Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. <sup>6</sup>The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; <sup>7</sup>the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. <sup>8</sup>Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

<sup>9</sup>You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. <sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. <sup>13</sup>For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, <sup>14</sup>because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” <sup>16</sup>The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. <sup>17</sup>Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

<sup>18</sup>I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup>The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

---

**We have celebrated** our freedom as a nation, as a people. The importance and value of July 4<sup>th</sup> to us as individuals and as a nation cannot be overstated. This

morning I want to explore the intersection of faith and freedom, where faith and freedom meet. I hope it will

help us be both better citizens and better Christians.

The way Paul talks about the Spirit setting us free, and the freedom our Constitution upholds, make a natural connection. But it can be easy to confuse the proper order of those two. We can quite readily merge the two and anything our nation does becomes “Christian” in our mind and anything “Christian” must be in accordance with our political viewpoint. I have seen television preachers wave the flag and insist that somehow one political party or the other has God’s platform. Of course, the corollary to that is the opposing party is the party of Satan. This skews Christianity and risks seriously perverting the real gospel. Our mindset must be that God comes first and nation comes, at best, second. No human government can fully embody God’s principles because every system created by human beings is bound to be flawed. No political party fully represents God’s viewpoint. We know this, but it is difficult to separate our religion and our politics. How do we learn from Paul what freedom really is for us as Christians and how do we apply that as citizens of a great and free nation?

Paul talks about how “the spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.” We are free as Christians. We are free from religious “law” to this extent. We are still called to live justly and mercifully, but not in order to be saved by God. God has saved us by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. In response, our calling as Christians is to do our best to live up to the law. The truth is we

cannot do that perfectly because we are not perfect. But we also are not subject to the penalty of death for failing to be perfect. All of this is a gift from God. This is the message of Jesus Christ, and the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. We are free because Christ has set us free. We are free because he believed in us despite all our flaws, not because we believed in him. So, like salvation, being free is God’s gift to us.

Paul also says we are free from the control of our sinful nature, of being human. In other words, we cannot say, as Flip Wilson dressed up as Geraldine used to say, “The devil made me do it.” He says that if we let the spirit of Christ live in us we are free from the power of sin, and therefore we should live like we are free. He says we are free to live like we are led by a spirit of love for God, a love that makes us cry out to God as “Abba,” Father. What this tells me is that if we choose to let God’s spirit come to life in us, to make room for God’s spirit it will make us free in ways we may not have ever experienced. But God does not force his way into our lives. We are free to choose not to let that spirit into our lives.

You see, where faith and freedom meet is at the place called Spirit. Paul says when we live by this spirit we feel an obligation, not to the temptations of our sinful selves, but to the spirit of God. Being led by the spirit is different from the rule of “law and order.” “Law and order” was often used by those concerned with maintaining the status quo for the benefit of those in power, whether they use that power justly or

not. When God's spirit rules in our lives we are free to let go of our selfish, demanding side. We are free to relate to others with empathy rather than with cynicism. We are free to give and share and bless instead of grasp and hate and fear.

Letting God's spirit rule in our spirits is different from the world's so-called "Golden Rule," which perverts the Christian version. Instead of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," it cynically states either "them that has the gold, rules" or worse, "do unto others before they can do unto you." God's spirit not only frees us from an attitude of having rights and freedoms that no one has the right to interfere with to an attitude of seeking to share liberty and freeing others.

This is a truly great nation. It is a great blessing to live free compared with the oppression that so much of the world lives under. It is great to be free to worship as we choose, to vote for our officials, to speak our minds as we feel. How much greater and stronger would our nation be if we were to live at the intersection of faith and freedom.

At the personal level how much greater would we be if we took less of a "me-first" attitude and put others and our common good as a nation first? This seems to me to be consistent with being a Christian first and a citizen second. We are not truly free if our lives are based on selfishness and fear. If we live afraid that everyone else is waiting to take what is ours, we will never be free. If we are living by the spirit of Christ within I think it would be natural to put

others first and to put the common good before our own personal privilege.

The temptation is to think that spirituality is about myself only. Often we think that growing spiritually means going off by our selves and thinking about our own internal spirit and what we need to be better, or more whole, or happier. The reality is that true spirituality calls us in a different direction. It sets us free from selfishness and me-first-ism. It reminds us of the importance of others.

Ironically, when many people talk about things of the spirit and spirituality they mean something that is little more than "navel-gazing." False spirituality is absorbed with my own internal satisfaction and well-being. In fact, spirituality is about something very different in the eyes of those who really understand the life of the spirit of God.

I think this came to life a little more for me when I read a story that Myron Augsburg shared. He had gone out into a park near his office in Washington, D.C. to eat lunch. While he was sitting on the bench a man who was clearly a "street person," came up to him and asked, "Are you a preacher?" Myron says he has no idea how the man knew, but he told the man he was a preacher and the man asked him, "Why should I care that Jesus Christ died on a cross 2000 years ago?"

Myron said the Spirit just gave him the words. He said, "have you ever had a friend?"

The man said, “Of course I have friends,” a little indignantly, as if Myron might think he didn’t.

Myron said, “If your friend was in trouble what would you do?”

“I’d help him, of course.”

“What if it meant you had to go out of your way? Or what if it cost you money, or caused you pain even?”

“If he is my friend, his problem is my problem!” the man replied.

Myron said to himself, “Friend, you have just evangelized yourself!” To the man he said “that is what God said to you and me when he sent Jesus here and when Jesus died on the cross that is what he said to us: your problem is my problem. He made our sin his sin. He made our problems his problems and he still does.” In other words real spirituality is about setting others free. It isn’t just about our freedom, our getting fulfilled by focusing on ourselves. Faith and freedom come together when we focus on others and their problems and the ways we can set them free more than we worry about our own freedoms.

Richard McBrien says spirituality is “other-oriented.” It requires that we care about the needs of others. He reminds us that Jesus’ own spirituality, was reflected in his mission. “When asked by the disciples of John the Baptist whether he was the one who was promised or should they search for yet another, Jesus answered: ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the

dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them.’”<sup>1</sup>

We are truly free when we are more concerned for freeing others than in exercising our own freedom. That takes having the spirit of God at the center of our lives. That takes letting God’s spirit make us free. That is why spirit is the center of the place where freedom and faith meet. AMEN.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard McBrien, "Guidelines for Spirituality," Program #3832, May 21, 1995, csec.org.