

Freedom: The balance point between tyranny and chaos
A sermon preached by John Burton on June 9, 2024
At Trinity United Church - Vernon, British Columbia

Sixty years ago on the 21st of June, three civil rights workers were murdered in rural Mississippi. James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were working with the Congress of Racial Equality to register African Americans who were largely excluded from voting. The three men, along with hundreds of other volunteers and dozens of social justice oriented organizations were dedicated to making real the promise implied in Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation barely 100 years earlier, the promise of freedom for enslaved people and equal treatment of all citizens.

1964 had been declared "Freedom Summer" by a collective of groups including Martin Luther King Jr's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The idea was both to increase the number of blacks voting in the segregated South and to raise national awareness of the living conditions and oppressive structures which rendered African-Americans, though technically liberated from slavery, still bound in chains that left them, not second class citizens, but barely citizens at all.

The organizers had hoped to capture the attention of the nation by bringing to light the crudely effective ways in which blacks were barred from voting – barely 5% of blacks, who constituted 1/3 of Mississippi population, were able to cast a ballot. Their aim was not to have the white liberal northerners swoop into the south and accomplish the liberation of African Americans, implying that only whites had the power to free the blacks. Rather the planners hoped to organize a grass roots movement that would provide a structure whereby black citizens could, acting in concert with sympathetic whites, challenge and change the structure of politics in the south. It was, however, the deaths of these three young men, and the months-long search for their bodies, that made the national news and thus the awareness of fair minded people throughout the United States of the inequities that had largely been dismissed as a regional issue.

Freedom Summer was a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, but it was not the beginning, and the close of the year 1964 was not its end. The freedom that organizers, volunteers and millions of supportive citizens hoped to bring to African-Americans with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in July of that year still eludes not only black Americans, but citizens oppressed for myriad reasons by power structures that are in many ways more tyrannical than they were fifty years ago.

In opening his speech to the assembled marchers for jobs and freedom in 1963, now remembered as his "I have a dream" speech, Martin Luther King Jr. referred to Abraham Lincoln's Presidential Order freeing the slaves - the Emancipation Proclamation. That "momentous decree", King said, "came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous

daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But,” King went on, “one hundred years later the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”

Another sixty years on segregation and discrimination continue, not only for African Americans. We have been made aware of the pervasiveness of the exercise of power for the benefit of the privileged in preference to all manner of marginalized people. The Civil Rights Movement began or at least accelerated a broader awareness of systemic injustice toward people who for a distressingly wide array of reasons have been deemed by those in positions of authority to be less worthy participants in the rights and privileges of our liberal democracies.

Characterizing those in power is a little difficult. I recall when the term WASP was often used. Now we often hear those in power referred to as White Heterosexual Males. My focus today, however, is not on a sociological study of the structures of oppression and advantage, but on the concept of freedom as it is applied by both oppressed and oppressor.

The long trek out of Egypt which our young people presented so effectively this morning was a seminal biblical story for the Civil Rights Movement. It is easy to see why. African Americans had been enslaved for 240 years. Escape from the secessionist South to the North seemed to be an emulation of the Hebrews’ epic journey. Freedom meant liberation from the slave-driver’s lash and the ability to live one’s life according to one’s own choices, not as property that could be bought and sold by someone else.

The story of the flight out of Egypt tells not only of escape from slavery, but of the formation of a nation. Freedom was achieved through collective action and it was maintained by collaborative effort. The events at Mount Sinai, the giving of the Ten Commandments and the commitment of the gathered ex-slaves to the God who led them by a fiery pillar and a cloud formed them into a nation that was strong enough to sustain its identity, even in future times when oppression again seemed overwhelming.

Notwithstanding Dr King’s dream and the flights of oratory that he used to convey it, African Americans and other oppressed groups, have not achieved freedom from the “chains of discrimination.” They are not yet free. But the struggle for freedom begun in the Civil Rights era seems to me to have stalled in part because of an erosion of that sense of freedom as the product of collective action which results in collaboratively lived out justice for all.

Generalizations about a broad concept like freedom need always to be tempered with caveats. I think it fair to say, however, that freedom, as the word is used in much current political and social media rhetoric, has lost that sense of a collective achievement and too often is used when it might more accurately be called license. Freedom in the sense Dr. King used the word, and I think in the sense that the Hebrew slaves used it, was freedom to become an equal and fully responsible member of the human community. Freedom, as I

often hear the word these days, is used to describe freedom from accountability, or responsibility for the collective good.

One of the painful lessons of the Covid 19 epidemic was the extent to which many people asserted their right to refuse vaccines or to be bound by public health measures because those measures limited their freedom. Such assertions of freedom ignore the old adage that my freedom to swing my fist ends at the tip of your nose. To claim that my right to refuse to be vaccinated supersedes your right to be free from the risk of exposure to a deadly infectious disease is not an assertion of freedom but a claim of entitlement to make decisions that put others at risk without accountability. It is also a refusal to accept the rule of law as an appropriate way of governing how we live together collectively. That is, it is a claim that I am free to act as I wish, without considering the social consequences of my acts.

And lest one say that forced adherence to the rule of law is tyranny, we need to be reminded that participation in a community is fundamental to our freedom, indeed it is fundamental to our survival. Without community, life would be, as Thomas Hobbes declared centuries ago, “nasty, brutish and short.”

This is not to say that governing bodies, whether they be democratic or autocratic always get it right. Yielding our freedom is conditional on the right to challenge the acts and the rules of the governor. But we challenge authority not by ignoring it with a claim that to do so is to act out our freedom, rather we challenge authority by pursuing the means that the system of liberal democracy makes available to us. Should we fail to recognize authority and the enforcement of collective responsibility, human society will crumble and we achieve not freedom but anarchy or unaccountable tyrants will take control.

Freedom, in the sense that I am proposing, is a balance point between oppression and chaos. Ironically, those who rail against social order as tyrannical overlook the fact that the freedom without accountability that they proclaim leads to tyranny just as surely, for without law, without accountability to the collective it is only the strongest, and most ruthless, who will prevail.

In a few moments Heidi is going to sing one of the anthems of the Civil Rights Movement. Written in 1962 by Montreal's own Oscar Peterson, the Hymn to Freedom had lyrics added a few years later that seem to me to capture this sense that my freedom is totally dependent on the freedom of all. That freedom is realized in collective acts of caring, compassion, and communal responsibility.

In the words of the Hymn: “When every hand joins every hand and together moulds our destiny, that's when we'll be free.”