

Everybody Says Freedom

April 10, 2022

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

Readings

A reading for Passover from Beth El Congregation in Sudbury, Massachusetts:

What sacrifices would we make for freedom today? What would we leave? How far would we go? How deeply would we look within ourselves? Our ancestors had no time to await the rising of the bread. Yet we, who have that time, what do we do to be worthy of our precious inheritance? We were slaves in Egypt... but now we are free. How easy it is for us to relive the days of our bondage as we sit in the warmth and comfort of our seder. How much harder to relieve the pain of those who live in the bitterness of slavery today.

Matthew 21:6-13

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting:

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in a turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

He said to them, "It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer';

but you are making it a den of robbers."

Sermon

How can one not be in awe of the courage of the Ukrainian people? The courage of their president?

They are of course fighting for their home, for their land, for their country. And they are fighting for their freedom. Powerful motivators.

Would we have such courage? Would I? I find it hard to imagine, but in similar circumstances, fighting for your very life, your home, your children, your freedom... likely so.

The first reading this morning, for Passover, asked questions very much like these. As we heard: "What sacrifices would we make for freedom today?"

Well, we do see the Ukrainian people answering this question with their lives. Perhaps we would too.

“Everybody Says Freedom” is the name of one of the Civil Rights songs from the 1960s. It is a simple but powerful song into which folks could improvise fresh lines for as long as the energy and creativity lasted:

Everybody says freedom
Everybody says freedom
Everybody says freedom... freedom... freedom.

In the cottonfield, freedom...
In the jailhouse...
All across the south... freedom, freedom

Yet for all the possible improvised phrases and variations, everybody singing that Civil Rights anthem had pretty much the same ideas about the nature of freedom: Freedom to vote, freedom to have the same quality education for their children as anyone else, freedom from violence and discrimination of all kinds.

Today in our nation? Yes, everybody says freedom... but “freedom,” which you would think should be – and often is – a unifying idea and ideal... isn’t always. We only need to think as far as vaccine and mask mandates... or what books should be taught or available in schools.

But it is not just now that freedom is a contested term – political freedom in particular. It has ever been so. Further, freedom is and has always been a relative term.

The Puritans, for example, including our religious ancestors here at Old Ship, came to this part of the world we are told for religious freedom, freedom to worship as they chose... but that freedom did not extend as far as giving individuals the freedom not to come to church or to hold varying beliefs... nor did the Puritans hesitate to take land away from those who were already here, limiting quite dramatically and terribly their freedom to hunt and fish or just to be where they had always been, to live as they had always lived.

And we know only too well that about a century and a half later when the colonies gained their freedom from the British, the leaders of the new United States did not extend freedom to those they had enslaved. Indeed, the institution of slavery was baked into the Constitution side by side with the First Amendment guaranteeing, in words anyway, freedom of speech and religion and the press and so on.

Most generally of all, freedom can never mean that everyone can do absolutely whatever they want whenever they want. We need, for example, things like rules of the road; and you can’t just walk into someone’s house or a store and take things; and your freedom to wave your fist around stops at the end of your neighbor’s nose.

None of this, though (the contested and relative nature of freedom) means that freedom is not a real thing, not an ideal and a reality worth striving and struggling for, even worth fighting for when it comes to that – as we are reminded daily in the dispatches from Ukraine these days.

Yet... as that Passover reading reminded us, it is all too easy to take our freedom for granted... all too easy to think the journey to freedom for us, in our time, in our nation, is over – that we’ve made it to the promised land of freedom for all and once and for all.

Easy, that is, to take it for granted, to think the journey is over... from a place of privilege: White privilege if we are white. Economic privilege if we are financially secure. The privilege of physical safety if we are safe from random gang violence or an invading neighbor.

The Passover story reminds us of the courage it often takes to struggle for freedom, this story of people escaping bondage to seek freedom in a new land. How can we not hear the resonance with immigration stories in our own history and in our own time? Hear the resonance in the stories and courage of those leaving their homes in Afghanistan, Central America... or Ukraine? Hear the resonance and courage in relation to the journeys of those at our southern border? Or those making the dangerous Mediterranean crossing?

Yes, worth pondering the courage the journey to freedom requires in every case:

Leaving home for freedom...

Escaping violence for freedom...

Taking up arms for freedom...

Seeking safety for the children... safety and freedom.

And what about Palm Sunday? Sounds so peaceful and beautiful: Palm Sunday. We easily picture the scene – Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Passover approaching not incidentally), people shouting “hosanna”, strewing palms along the way.

But this was no walk (or ride) in the park. Jesus was on a mission – which was also a mission about freedom – freedom from oppressive Roman control, freedom from oppressive religious rules and regulations, spiritual freedom.

For all this he was a marked man. And he knew he was in danger because of his “dangerous” teachings and practices, freely healing anyone in need of healing, freely welcoming all to the table. For all this, indeed, he expected, we are told, to be arrested and executed.

His journey, too, required courage.

That word – as I reminded us a few weeks ago – that word “courage” is at root a word about heart (which is the Latin root of the word).

Which leads to the cliché that home is where the heart is.

Immigrants – whether in the Biblical Exodus or in our own times – seeking a new home, a home where they can be free. Or anyone seeking to struggle for freedom in the home where they already live, in Ukraine or Russia for that matter, or during the Civil Rights movement, or in the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights, these days so poignantly and importantly including equal rights

for trans people, the right simply to be who they are without fear of bullying or violence... simply for being who they are.

Yes, everyone seeking to be free and at home in this world, at home.

So yes, *everybody* says freedom... and though we will sometimes disagree on exactly what freedom means in practice... and we will and do disagree on precisely what limits there need to be on freedom – whether it comes to free speech, the right to bear arms, a woman’s rights over her own body, and much else... simply being able to have these conversations is a manifestation of the political freedom that we all treasure.

Before I conclude this morning, these thoughts about our heritage here:

Our own Unitarian Universalist tradition has been on long journey to claim and shape what we call our free faith... including here at First Parish Old Ship church, our journey from our Puritan roots, including the Calvinist idea of predestination (not much freedom there), to our affirmation of what the fourth of our Unitarian Universalist Principles express as the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” – each of us on our individual search, not needing to agree on much more than to be in continuing conversation and relationship with one another.

Now... when I was eleven or so years old and our parents first joined a Unitarian church, I thought it was so cool, because as I understood it as a Unitarian you could believe whatever you wanted to believe! Pretty darned exciting for an almost adolescent.

Well... I eventually came to understand that it is more like this: After our search or in the midst of our free search for truth and meaning in life, we come to believe what we feel we must. In other words, not a whim, but a conclusion, however tentative, derived from free thought, reflection, experience.

For me, this brings us full circle this morning. Since if my free and responsible search leads me to the conclusion that in spite of appearances to the contrary, we are all not just separate individuals, but are part of one interdependent family of humanity and of life (as our seventh UU Principle affirms)... then I am led to value the freedom and well-being of others as much as I value my own... led to speak up and speak out for justice (also part of our UU Principles)... led to support with my words and my wallet all those who struggle for freedom, wherever they are.

Because everyone not only says, but deserves the same freedoms we treasure and that we enjoy here.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.