
Sermon
An Institution of Freedom

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
August 2, 2009

First Reading: Nehemiah 7:73-8:12

When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’, lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ ¹¹So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ ¹²And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Sermon

This church and the Unitarian and Universalist traditions make the claim that they are part of the free church tradition. That is not surprising given the common Unitarian attitude towards freedom. We celebrate freedom. We insist on freedom. We claim that we have more freedom than anyone else. And in particular we claim freedom of conscience and freedom of belief, insisting that a person – and that means especially ‘us’ – should be judged not by what he or she believes, but by his or her actions. It is why people in and about churches such as this say that we are a church of deeds, not creeds. So we are free. We are not to be bound by creeds or adherence to the bible or any other set of writings. We are free. Nobody can tell us what to say or do! And out of that adherence to freedom

comes an emphasis on individualism – or maybe it's the other way around. I'm not sure. John Wayne was not a Unitarian, but in many ways the role he played over and over in the movies – and with all deference to anyone here who is a fan, he always played the exact same character – that of a radical individualist, can be seen as a sympathetic caricature of the individualistic model that is so often found in Unitarian churches. And that points to some serious questions. Where do we find the genuine roots of freedom? Is freedom a product of individualism? In other words, is freedom a quality solely of the individual or is freedom a product of the form of the societies and institutions in which individuals participate? To put it another way, does it mean anything when I say this is a 'free church'? Is this church just a collection of individuals who are free independent of this church – or any other institution or societal form – or do we become free because we are participants in institutions of freedom?

Having decided a couple of months ago that this week I would preach on the free church I had occasion to think about it while doing my summer vacation reading. Part of that reading was a recent biography of Ulysses S. Grant and in reading the story of his life I found something that I believe says a lot about the nature of freedom.

I've long been fascinated by Grant. Most historians in the hundred years following his death were unkind to him claiming he was an alcoholic and neither a good general nor a good President. But that opinion is now being revised. There were serious corruption problems during his second term as President, but none involved him personally. In fact even his enemies had to grudgingly admit that Grant was probably as close to being the incorruptible man as one can find and current reviews of his presidency show far more accomplishments than have previously been attributed to him. And on close examination of the historical record it is now apparent that his reputation for drinking was egregiously exaggerated by his political enemies. His problems with alcohol were related to one brief period in his life long before the Civil War. A growing number of military historians also now conclude that he was the superior of Lee as a general. In addition he is universally acknowledged as having written the finest memoir of all our Presidents. It is also considered the equal of, if not the superior of, any military memoir in recorded history. He was a remarkably gifted writer. But what I find most interesting about the revisionist assessment of Grant is the reason why for a hundred years so many historians seemed to go out of their way to attack him. I believe it has to do with the nature of freedom.

Grant did not begin the Civil War as an abolitionist. Before the war he had owned one slave who had been given to him, but rather than sell him, he set him free. That is important, because at the time he was desperate for money and he could have sold the man for what would have been the equivalent today of a year's wages for many people. Although he did not seem to have given much thought to the slavery question I infer he was – at some level – personally uncomfortable with it. During the war his attitude evolved from one of seeming indifference and suspicion of slaves and their ability to perform as free men to active acknowledgment of their abilities and support for their rights as citizens – including the right to vote. Following the war, both as general-in-chief and then as President, he became as ardent a supporter of the rights of the freedmen as anyone in the country. This was in the face of armed rebellions led by the Ku Klux Klan and various 'rifle clubs' that actually staged the military takeover of New Orleans and other areas in the south for periods of time – their purpose being overtly racist, their purpose being to establish white supremacist governments and subjugate the freed blacks and to eliminate all of their civil rights. It was Grant who was responsible for putting down those revolts. But Grant was

soon alone. The country was tired of war and a political compromise was reached over Grant's objections. The armed rebellions would stop provided the southern states were allowed to establish a racist social order. The era of Jim Crow was born. It would not be undone until the Civil Rights Movement a hundred years later. It was Grant's insistence on the rights of Freedmen that led generations of historians who were influenced by racist attitudes to attack him.

But what does this have to do with the institutions of freedom? Blacks in the south – and in other areas of the country – were left in a second class status. They were not truly free because the institutions of society did not recognize their freedom. As individuals they did not have the power to be free. What emerged was a social order that said the institutions of government were not there to protect freedom, but to ensure that every individual could do as he pleased limited only by the efforts of other individuals – not the government. If an individual or group of individuals could raise a mob to lynch a man because he was black, they were 'free' to do so. The role of government was not to ensure what I would call genuine freedom, but to sustain and enforce the law of the jungle, the right of each individual to do as he please impeded only by the efforts of other individuals. It is ironic that one of the worst racial slurs throughout our history has been to equate African Americans to creatures of the jungle, when in fact it was Jim Crow society and white supremacy that were based on the law of the jungle.

African Americans did not begin to reap the fruits of freedom until the institutions of our country – in particular our government institutions – began to function as institutions of freedom. As institutions of freedom they were concerned with the rights and powers of individuals, but they were also concerned with the regulation and limitation of individual rights and powers so that every person had the opportunity to avail themselves of their individual rights. They did so by taking away the 'freedom' under Jim Crow of the individual to lynch a man because of the color of his skin or to deny anyone the right to vote.

A free church that is an institution of freedom has similar characteristics. Unlike creedal churches where the pulpit and pew are required to be in lock step agreement, you do not have to agree with what I say. And it follows I don't have to agree with you! Each person has the individual right and the individual power to believe as the conscience dictates. But freedom isn't just about the ability to do and say as one pleases. There are also the obligations of freedom. Each person in this church has the right to believe as conscience demands, but no one has the right to belittle another person because of differences of opinion or to shout down another. Where there is disagreement we are obligated to support the right of the other to follow his or her own conscience. There is no obligation to believe as another believes and there is not even an obligation to respect the beliefs of another, but there is an obligation to respect the other person even – and especially – when you are certain that other person is wrong, perhaps terribly wrong. A church, is a free church, a church is an institution of freedom only when it recognizes and demands adherence to both the rights and obligations of freedom; and individuals are truly free only when they recognize that their freedom is not the freedom to shout down another's voice, the freedom to be wrong as well as right.

Not all laws are good. That is why it is sometimes said, "The law is an ass." That was certainly true in the case of Jim Crow. But without laws, without the willing agreement to agree that freedom requires limits, there can be no freedom. That is what I think the story from Nehemiah represents. I suspect most people have never heard of the book of Nehemiah. But without it I doubt we would have the bible today. It began with the reading

of what they considered to be the law. We don't know what their version of the law contained. In some ways it doesn't matter. What was important was their willingness to accept that there would be rules about their lives and by doing so they created a culture and context within which they could live and prosper. And Judaism has done that despite centuries of persecution.

In this church we have something similar. We do not have a book of the law. We do not claim to know what God wills for us. I, for one, do not believe in the traditional ideas about God. But I do believe that to be a free church, to be an institution of freedom that we have to something like the law that is mentioned in Nehemiah. And we do. It is the idea of covenant. It is a promise we make to one another. It is the agreement that we will live our lives and regulate our actions in light of what it says. We affirm that we have no creeds. We declare that if there is a God that the human conscience is the meeting place between God and the individual. No one is be required to proclaim belief in any creed or any set of principles and purposes that contradicts the individual conscience. We insist that each person is to be judged not by what they believe, but by how he or she behaves. And we go a step further. Each of us is obligated to recognize that his or her freedom is never greater than the freedom of the next person. This church is a free church, this church is an institution of freedom because it lifts up that idea in the words of our covenant.

Love is the spirit of this church and service its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace; to seek the truth in love; and to help one another.

We are an individualistic religion. We have been heavily influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson who declared that "man alone is greater than man in combination." It's an attitude that is sometimes described as atomistic individualism. I believe Emerson was wrong. His atomistic individualism isn't freedom, it's just the condition of being alone. What makes us free, what makes this church an institution of freedom is not how we are separate from one another, but how we are together. It is that idea, an idea we express in the words of the covenant we speak together each Sunday morning, that makes us worthy to be Winthrop's city upon a hill.

For the free church and for all institutions of freedom,

Amen.