

freedom? How can I make the choices I must now make? What is going to become of me? Can I really make it on my own? Then implicitly, what should receive my ultimate loyalty? To whom or what should I be committed? To whom or what should I give my all?

And notice, these are not the questions that are just asked by an idealistic eighteen-year-old, venturing forth from the nest to that strange land of independence. These questions become some of the lasting issues of life. They are posed over and over again as we journey. They have to be addressed and answered over and over again as we decide which road of life to follow.

These questions are precisely the ones Joshua implicitly posed before the people of God. The children of Israel had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years and are now ready to enter the Promised Land. Like a nurturing parent, God had been providing manna, quail and water when needed. There was a measure of freedom being experienced, for they were no longer bound as slaves. But they have yet to become something else – they have yet to discover their new identity and purpose. They have now experienced freedom FROM, but they have not yet found freedom FOR. So Joshua presents to them a choice – an opportunity to transform freedom into something purposeful.

As we soon discover, a by-product of freedom is choice: “Choose this day whom you will serve. . . .” Freedom is not an invitation to aimless wandering; it is an invitation to form a purpose and then commitment. The choice offered by Joshua is one such invitation to commitment – to the question of ultimate loyalty. God does not say, “Trust me and I will do great things for you.” God declares, “I have already done great things for you, now trust me.” The choice offered is an invitation for loyalty to God, who has already demonstrated loyalty to the people by choosing them and delivering them.

But how can we speak of freedom and commitment in the same breath, when they seem to contradict one another? When a marriage unravels, we usually hear one or both of the parties saying something like, “I just couldn’t keep my commitment; I want my freedom.” It is almost as if they are saying, “Commitment equals bondage, obligation, duty, responsibility” – but is freedom really the opposite of commitment?”

If we were to ask a first semester college student what they like about the freedom of being away from home, we might get answers such as: “Now I can stay up as late as I please; I can wear what I want to wear without comment from my parents. I can choose to attend classes or not; I can party when I want to. I can max out the credit card on food, clothing and entertainment. I can offer

outrageous opinions and do outrageous things.” In theory, the student is free to choose in any and all of these instances – until the financial resources give out, and the first semester grades are out, and staying in school, or keeping that scholarship becomes precarious.

Freedom – oh how we love the word, the concept, the sound of it. Orlando Patterson calls freedom the most sacred of Western concepts: We live for it, we love it, we cherish it; we are prepared to kill for it, and some - surely too many among us - die for it.

Yet freedom is not the unambiguous ideal our moral shorthand is tempted to make of it. We have all heard those accounts of inmates who are freed from their incarceration, only to find that their new liberty is more demanding than their old jail life. Some often commit petty crimes so they can be put back into the security of the jail cell where there are three square meals a day, no decisions to be made, no striving to make a living, no real responsibilities.

We have watched some of the countries now liberated from Communism struggle with their freedom as they enter the new market society. And surely we remember how the children of Israel complained after being liberated from slavery in Egypt, wondering if God had taken them into the wilderness to simply let them perish. Freedom actually calls us to new levels of choice and responsibility.

The moralists of a previous generation understood what we contemporary North Americans so often forget: that freedom is not merely absence of restraint. As one such writer said, “What is freedom? Rightly understood, (it is) a universal license to DO GOOD.” The essence of freedom is not liberation from obligation and responsibility, as we so easily suppose. The essence and expression of freedom is CHOICE. We are free in order to be able to choose.

Freedom requires choices. We all have choices we have to make since we are a free people: The parents want their daughter to attend medical school so as to earn a lucrative living and bring a measure of honor to the family. So how could she freely choose to become a medical missionary? What is so noble about that in a world that values wealth and monetary gain?

My group of friends insists that I adhere to the group identity by acting a certain way, dressing a certain way. How could a person choose not to succumb to such peer pressure? How could one choose to face rejection from one’s own group? Freedom often forces difficult choices upon us, but so often the right choices bring us a new sense of freedom in return.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while a prisoner in one of Hitler's concentration camps, was awaiting his execution. Yet he demonstrated he was free even in the midst of imprisonment by choosing how he would respond to his bondage and impending death. He spoke to other prisoners and shared his faith and hope with them, using the lines of a hymn of Martin Luther: "Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also; The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever. It was said of the late Nelson Mandela that during his years of imprisonment in South Africa, that he was the only truly free person in that country, because he was living out his convictions.

If the essence of freedom is choice, then it would follow that the object of freedom is commitment. We are told that the Millennials of today often say, "I want to find something to which to give my life - something I can DO to which I can be committed." One of the characteristics of this up-and-coming generation they do seem to want to live and act for some higher purpose. In fact, IF they are attracted to a church, it is first because that congregation is engaged in service to the community – it is to that effort that they want to belong – then they will believe.

Social critics say that we as a society have lost our sense of commitment. They argue that we have become autonomous individuals with no sense of commitment beyond what we can get for ourselves out of life. They say we have lost our sense of duty to the larger community and are driven only by putting ourselves as number one. We have always hoped our heroes and celebrities will find the way for us, but they have failed. The excessive focus on money and power as the only means to happiness is so often found to be empty and void. Some of the most enslaved people of our times are those who claim to be free to do whatever they want in the pursuit of happiness, yet never find any satisfaction.

Yet contrast that way of living with the call of Jesus who proclaims: "to gain one's life, one must lose it ..." "The last will be first and the first last." "I am the way, the truth and the life," and his truth will set you free –if we choose to be committed to him.

Willa Cather in her novel *My Antonia* offers a remarkable line in which she defines happiness. She writes, ". . . happiness is to be dissolved into something complete and great." Imagine . . . she says dissolved . . . not affirmed . . . not self-enhanced or self-glorified – but dissolved. That line is carved into her tombstone in a cemetery in New Hampshire. The implication is that life worth living is a life that is dissolved into service – into commitment to a cause beyond the self. It is in

that service and commitment that we find our true freedom and our sure happiness.

Today, we have been honoring the older adults of our congregation. Most of those we have been honoring are part of what Tom Brokaw has termed, "The Greatest Generation." There is a sense in which this particular generation has embodied the words we have been addressing today: Freedom, Choice, Commitment. Over 70 years ago, they cast aside thought for self and united themselves by a sense of duty to protect this country's freedom from the tyranny of oppression.

Then through some of their most productive years, they continued to dissolve themselves into something complete and great. Through their efforts these "Builders" as social scientists now label them, saw to protecting and enhancing our freedoms through the establishment of churches and schools, and a social fabric that often addressed social injustices, as painful change was made to serve the larger community.

As with every generation, they were not perfect and mistakes were made. But along with the freedom came choice; and after the choice they followed with commitment.

If you have ever read the history of Riverside, you likely observed that in the early years the congregational life here was not always smooth and easy. There were new members to attract, land to purchase, buildings to construct, programs to establish. There were times when there were not nearly enough funds. There were times when the space program struggled because of tragedies and it appeared as if the whole community would disperse into a forgotten memory.

Yet the members here at Riverside chose to continue to journey onward. As a group they were and are committed to God's call, and we are the benefactors of their choices, their commitment and their labors. Surely, what they have done and accomplished by the grace of God, stands as a witness to we who have inherited their legacy. For surely, they have answered faithfully and well the challenge of Joshua as an example for us to follow: "Choose this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Amen.