

## WHAT'S FREEDOM FOR?

Text on New Year's Eve, 2011

*Galatians 5: 13-26*

**W**elcome. It's a joy to see you—to see this . . . intelligence out in The Riverside Church late at night. Many of you are unknown to me; you are not “this flock” and I am not your shepherd. So we're here for a different purpose—a ritual purpose. There is, of course, a ritual across all the land, as the clock strikes twelve on this night, in one time zone and then another, and we pass into a new year. So, in respect of this ritual, let us all be its priests.

The New Year is unique. Saturdays and Thursdays come and go; Junes, Octobers come and go, as do Christmas festivals and the Fourth of July. But the year—2011—that's a one-off. And it's almost gone. We come here to mark its passing in the awareness that time itself is precious, sacred. And we have only a little. Sometimes we say of time: “I'm free at that time” or “You're free to use the time as you choose.” We combine the experience of freedom, which is our subject tonight, with time. The connection is very strong indeed, for the experience of being free often comes when we feel we have freely chosen how to use time. In this Watch Night, let us reflect on time and freedom. What is freedom for?

As you no doubt know, the Watch Night tradition is also rooted in a story about freedom. The setting for its first celebration is the terrifying Civil War. This nation's fate hung in a balance. On December 31, 1862 at midnight, fully 100 days after President Lincoln had publicized the coming proclamation, so that all the nation had time to absorb the new reality, many African-Americans waited for the declaration that slaves should now be “forever free.” In this context, the word “freedom” is perfectly clear. It means having full rights in one own's body to discharge its uses in time. The apostle Paul calls the body “the temple of the Lord.” Therefore it is precious. Therefore, time is precious. So the use of the body and the use of time are given together—and not by human arts but by the Creator. Freedom is about the use of time.

But we must offer a warning here, because Americans are often confused about freedom and about time. In so far as time's passing causes us to be aware of our mortality, many are tempted to deny its reality, for our culture is terrified of death. As for ordinary New Year rituals, it is probably no coincidence that many get intoxicated, masking the meaning of time, for as we said at the outset, no ritual so plainly marks out the for the whole people the fact that time is passing, and opportunities are lost. Misleaders of every stripe—in politics, religion, entertainment—claim that your cherished American liberty is about freedom to do what you want where you want when you want (provided it's with your wife) without, as they love to say, government interference. Freedom from interference, freedom to buy stuff. Didn't one of them say to anxious

citizens that we should go shopping to prove to terrorists that we still have our freedoms?

This superficial promise of freedom *from* interference has always been dangled before “the mass of men, leading lives of quiet desperation” (Thoreau) to distract them from their inner crisis and their social crisis. The promise of freedom from interference serves to separate and atomize, to disenfranchise, dazzle, and distract the people from their human nature. It gets them out of the way so that greed is free to have its way. “They hate us for our freedoms,” we were often told by one misleader. He had it exactly wrong. We should rather try the idea that they hated us for our lack of freedom. Here is what I mean.

On Watch Night, 1862, Americans prepared, as we usually hear it said, “to free the slaves.” But this phrase puts the matter exactly backwards. As only the abolitionists of that day knew, emancipation prepared white Americans to free themselves! For to own a slave, or even to believe a man has a right to own a slave, is to shackle your mind and soul to a rack that tears apart the soul, and that of the whole nation. That is a fuller image of the evil of slavery. I am not offering any comparison of the evil wrought upon the backs of black Africans and African-Americans with that evil self-inflicted by those who believed in the right of slave-owning. The point is rather this: America was founded on principles of justice and equality; that is, on a *not* self-evident understanding of what it means to be a human being. The principles lie open for all to read in the Constitution. Therefore, this great nation had no chance for survival—was almost dead—as long as slavery continued. The white man freed himself! when through the office of that President, after four score and seven years, there was finally some movement in the direction of true freedom.

And we would say more. America will never truly be free, until a majority of the people know with mind and heart and soul that freedom hasn't really begun to ring until the those with power freely give power to those who need it. That is true freedom—when for the sake of others' need, you freely offer what no power can *require* you to offer. By contrast, freedom defined as “our rights”; freedom we cling to like a flag; freedom to swing our money or our fists or our weight around—these freedoms to “do as I wish” without interference you have just heard described by the apostle Paul with sorrow and disdain. The freedoms lodged in rights—even the freedom to vote, essential at it is—are simply of a lower order than the freedom you have to give up what you have a right to—when you see that it will help someone.

The proof of this surrounds us everyday. Consider two hungry children with full lunch boxes, and here, a third with no food. The two with the lunch boxes are free to eat, right? But if one does not eat, as he considers the foodless third, and the other goes ahead and eats freely, which one has more freedom? Now, to answer the question thoughtfully, we need a definition of freedom. I hope I may send you out into the new year's first night with a definition of a lesser freedom and a greater.

The child who eats his lunch is freer in regards to outward things. The one who considers the hungry and does not eat is freer in regard to inward things. It is as simple as that: there are distinctions in freedom. In America's public tale, we are taught to cherish freedom in outward things. But we have almost lost the trace of what it is to have freedom within—a true *self*-government. Spiritual traditions, by contrast, have focused on the distinction, that the lesser freedom in outward things, if unchecked by the greater freedom in inward things, leads to corruption, destruction, venality, and the death of the soul. If they "hate us for our freedoms," as we used to hear, it was a hatred for our extravagant use of outward freedoms, unchecked by the higher power of inner freedom: the freedom to consider, the freedom to let go, the freedom to give. The greater freedom belongs only to those who are conscious of a choice, who are genuinely free to decide to do or not to do. The exercise of this freedom requires an inner space not already filled, a place where the self can stand apart from itself and decide. The lesser freedoms are exercised by every creature on Earth. They belong to those who are able to do, and are *only* able to do, what lies within their natural powers. But the greater freedom is exercised only by humans. Alas, only by some of them, and even then, only sometimes.

Here we are, minutes from a new year. In its first bloom, many will make new resolutions and many will fail in their resolutions. Here we can see something important about our greater and lesser freedoms. Suppose January-self wanted to lose weight, but February-self doesn't care anymore! It seems January-self has been voted off the island—except that we can still hear her cry! This reminds us that our human nature is composed of not one self, but several. Now, earlier we said, "Freedom is about the use of time." The spiritual traditions focus the energy of our attention on the use of our greater freedom to become more aware of our nature, without guilt or recrimination. All the traditions are especially clear that you must take time to become aware of who you are and how your inner freedom is available to you. So we add this note: it is in the devotions of your spiritual path that you can become aware of your option to stop what you were doing or were going to do, in order to let in the new, especially for the sake of another. Nothing of the sort comes to Times Square on a New Year's Eve, of course, but it can come to you if you earnestly desire it. Here are several ways you can sense the greater freedom growing anew in you:

You have the freedom to activate your own inner process of thought. This is freedom! To think for your self. To learn to probe the mystery of your self by giving voice to truths as you see them, and then to engage with others, and see that you, and they, are free to think differently.

You have the freedom to see, in George Fox's timeless phrase, that "there is that of God in every person." To see the divine light in a stranger or in your beloved. What a treasure, to address a human being as "you." You cannot genuinely say "you" to another, except you have already accepted her into the circle which "we" is becoming. To acknowledge another's existence as

necessary for your own—this is great freedom!

You have the freedom to open your mind and listen to the other. Listening is a kind of power-sharing. You have freedom to give your power to the other; to use the basic tool, time, to open up your being to the influence of the other. How blessed we are, as “we” deepen our awareness of the communities in which “we” belong: to the city of New York, to the state, to this nation, and in ways we have not yet learned to articulate with conviction, to the world and to the cosmos.

All together, we are free to accept that we together have both the power and the duty to determine what we are here for! We can’t find it written in a book. We can’t be told it from on high. Those who claim such authority are troubling you. They do not know that by easing from the shoulders of the many the burden of collective discovery, they stall all moral development, in themselves and others. Humanity exists in order to discover collective meaning in our freedom and our consciousness.

A final thought: You have the freedom to untangle your self from yourself. This freedom hardly receives attention in ordinary discourse. It is the linchpin for all we have been thinking about this evening. Your self is not the same as your thoughts and your feelings and your reactions. Your self is free of them. This is part of the meaning in saying there is life eternal, for your thoughts and feelings and reactions are quite temporary— but you are not them. The distinction is eternal and absolute. It matters that you see that you are free: free from the burdens of your past and able to come into a future unharmed by your past. When you feel this pulse in the energy of your attention, namely, that you are able sometimes to choose freely what to give your attention to; that you choose, for a time, to not attend to your feelings of jealousy, or hatred, or uncertainty, or hurt or whatever they are; but rather, being different from all of that, see that you are free to choose to use your precious time to affirm the highest gift within yourself; then you are being born anew. You are learning to let go. You are alive. If enough people earnestly desire the gift of their greater freedom, there is yet a chance that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people—true self-government— shall not perish from this Earth.

#### Evening Gatha

Let me respectfully remind you: life and death are of supreme importance.  
Time swiftly passes by, and opportunity is lost.

Let us awaken, awaken.

Take heed, do not squander your life.