Book 8

Sunday August 27, 1978

"AFRAID TO BE FREE?" Luke 15:11-24

Afraid to be free? That doesn't sound very likely. Most of us if asked would say that above all we desire freedom, the freedom to make our own decisions, the freedom to decide what job we want, where we want to live, to marry or not to marry, and if we decide to marry, the freedom to choose our mate, how many children we want to have--in other words, we want the freedom as much as possible to be our own boss and to do what we want to do.

Yet we also know that freedom can be mis-understood, can be mis-used and that we can become afraid of freedom. These issues are at the heart of the story of the prodigal son found in the Gospel of Luke. And to properly understand the story, you and I need to put ourselves in the place of the prodigal son, and we need to see the Father in the story as God, who is the creator and therefore the parent of us all. It is a story about freedom and about God who waits for us.

The first thing we are told about the younger son in this story is his desire for complete freedom and then we see his misunderstanding of freedom. Notice particularly what happens to him, for it also happens to you and to me.

To begin with, this son is tired of what he feels are the limitations on his freedom. Often his father gets on his nerves. Why can't a person be his own boss? "Don't do this and don't do that!" Always there are the "Thou shalt not's." There are too many limitations in life for this young man. Why can't I just do what I want to do when I happen to feel like doing it?

The Father sees it differently. God does not bid and forbid just because he wants to make rules or to play tricks on his creatures or to give them inferiority feelings. Rather God knows that in this world we all need some boundaries, some limitations, some rules to live by--otherwise society falls into anarchy and we human beings fall apart as well. Limitations and rules can protect our freedom as well as limit our freedom.

We all know persons who have been brought up in almost total freedom, and what unbearable brats they turned out

to be--not only unbearable to others, but also a burden to themselves, sick of themselves and at odds with themselves, utterly unhappy in this fictitious freedom that knows no limits, no fears, no reverence.

To desire total freedom is a misunderstanding of freedom. We can imagine that the father and the younger son in the parable talked of this many times. Perhaps the son would say, "Father, I want to be totally independent. I can't go on living within your limits." And the father replies, "But you really have freedom. You are a human being in my house. You can come to me any time you wish and you can tell me anything and everything that is bothering you. My whole world belongs to you. I love you and provide for you. I forgive your mistakes. You are quite free and ultimately don't have to account to anyone but me."

But the son is not satisfied. To him freedom means being able to do whatever he wants to do and whenever he wants to do it. But to the father, freedom for the son means that he should become what he ought to be. He should not for example, become a servant of his desires, a slave to his ambitions, or a slave to his need for recognition. He should not trade his freedom with limits for slavery.

Yet the son will have none of it. He has a dreadful fear that he will not taste life to the full, that he may miss something. The mysteries of life are beckoning. He needs his share of his father's inheritance so that he can try everything. The father gives it to him. He does not force the boy to stay home. He can have his freedom as he understands it. God forces nobody.

Now the son can do what he wants. He lives in grand style. He has a new Corvette. He has friends. People turn to look at him on the street as he passes in his stylish new wardrobe. The apartment he rents has taste and style and is better than most. The parties he gives are the best. He has developed taste and style. He is making an impression even though everything seems to run mysteriously through his fingers.

One thing he forgets! Everything he has has come from the Father. But he uses it without taking that into account. As time passes, things begin to change. Sometimes he even gets no pleasure from the delights he can secure with his father's money. His life grows flat. The more unhappy

and lost he feels, the more he celebrates, the more he throws himself into the company of his friends, the more he tries to divert himself. He can no longer be alone. He must always have something going on around him.

The son is discovering he is not free. He is bound to his homesickness so he must amuse himself. He is a slave to his urges and desires and apetites so he must satisfy himself. He is a slave to his grand style of living and therefore he cannot let it go. He is prepared to lie and cheat and disregard every good resolution so bound is he by his standard of living.

His life goes from bad to worse. He loses his possessions, falls into poverty and finally has to hire himself out to a farmer who raises pigs. Now he is under a master who has no interest in him. This is the end of his freedom.

What he forgot, of course, is that we are always subject to one master or another. We are subject either to God and then we are in the Father's house, possessing the freedom of the children of God, or we are subject to our urges and desires or other masters, subject to our fears and our worries.

The son decides to return home. But what will he say to his father? "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."

The young man's words are psychologically sound. Having once misused and misunderstood his freedom, he is now afraid of it. The father had offered no resistance to his son's desire to leave home. Now the son is frightened by his freedom. Faced with the burden of resumption, he wants to turn over his freedom as a son in order to enjoy the security of a slave.

He mistrusts his abilities and doubts his capacities. "Treat me as one of your hired servants." Make most of my decisions for me. Tell me which field to work. Tell me what friends to make. Tell me how to manage my money. He is afraid to be free. "Here is my freedom. Give me my bread!"

Afraid to be free! That's part of our nature also. Sometimes we ask in dismay how tyrant after tyrant could come

to control so many people at so many points in history. The answer is that the masses are often afraid to be free.

The Hebrews after being freed from slavery in Egypt, soon began to long for the securities of slavery in Egypt. Eric Hoffer wrote, "Unless a person has the talents to make something of himself, that person will find freedom irksome." Hoffer goes on to point out that it was not sheer hypocrisy for the rank-and-file Nazis to declare that they were not guilty of the enormities charged against them. They considered themselves cheated and maligned when made to shoulder responsibility for obeying orders. Had they not joined the Nazi movement to be free from responsibility? Freedom can be a burden to some. It requires responsibility and decisions.

In his classic novel, THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, Fyodor Dostoyevsky deals with the anxiety of freedom in the section entitled, The Grand Inquisitor. He has the Cardinal say to Christ who has returned, "I tell you that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find some one quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom to which the ill-fated creature is born."

One of the real dangers of bigger and bigger government is that more and more we turn over to government decisions which we should be making for ourselves. We are forever in danger of surrendering our freedom in exchange for security.

Most of us have the urge to surrender our freedom or part of it subtle ways as well. We wish someone would make our difficult and even not so difficult decisions for us.

One reason astrology is so popular is because people like to believe that their decisions are made for them. It's all written in the stars. It takes away much of our own responsibility. Thus in our time almost any newspaper or magazine one picks up carries an astrologer's column with advice for the day or week or month. In some cities one can dial a special telephone number for daily horoscopic advice.

One can find astrological magazines with letters to the editor complaining of bad luck because Saturn was in conjunction with some other unpleasant planet or Jupiter was badly afflicted, or that a person's marriage was broken up because the signs were wrong from the beginning. If

a person takes this very seriously, it's a way of handing over our God-given freedom to astrology. "Why did I fail?" Because the signs were wrong. It had nothing to do with my own stupidity or lack of initiative or laziness. It's a convenient excuse.

If one takes astrology quite seriously, there is almost no freedom left for the individual. According to the astrologers, whenever a baby is born anywhere in the world, with the very first breath it takes, it receives all manner of astrological influences, from the sun, the moon, and all the planets, according to the signs they are in and that these influences form the character, and mold the destiny, and so virtually determine whether the person will end up on the gallows or in the White House, or anywhere in-between.

The principal reason why people turn to astrology and to other kindred superstitions is that they lack in their own lives the resources necessary to solve serious personal problems confronting them. They are afraid to be free. The yield to the pleasant suggestion that a golden key is at hand--a simple solution--the decisions can be made or are already made by the stars and the planets.

We are afraid to be free in so many ways. Occasionally when some problem person goes into the armed forces, his or her friends can be heard saying--"The army will do him good." They mean of course that the command system of the military will so the person good. And it may do that person some good for a time. But it can also become too easy to depend on directives from someone else. They release us from the need to think for ourselves.

A person's work can taken on this domination and we are no longer free. We hand over our freedom. We've all heard the comment, "I think he would die if he didn't have his work." When we are afraid to be free, we can hand over our freedom to almost any master.

One person put it this way: "There is a locked up potential in all of us that frequently remains locked up tight because we've sold our freedom as persons for the security of the system." We're always tempted to give our soul over for safekeeping, to exchange our freedom for the security that might come from an infallible book, an infallible church, an infallible tradition, an infallible husband or wife, an infallible set of principles.

Martin Luther was disturbed that the church of his time had interposed itself between human beings and God. In the life of faith there can be no proxies. There is no institution, no minister; there is no tradition, no theological system that can take the risk out of commitment for any one of us.

The parable of the prodigal son tells us that God wants us back from our mis-used freedom just as the father in the story wanted his son back. But God wants us back not as self-depreciating, groveling, sniveling human beings. Penitent yes; realizing that we often mis-use our freedom--that kind of penitence and humility. But at the same time, God wants us back as sons and daughters who are willing to stand fast in the freedom which God has given us.

It is significant that in the parable of the prodigal son, the young man rehearsed the line, "Make me as one of your hired servants," but never got a chance to say that part. He only got a chance to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

Once he had said that, the Father would not let him continue. Instead the Father said, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry."

If we had been that father, there might have been a few, "I told you so's." But in the story as Jesus Christ told it, the father simply and joyfully welcomes his son back. Thus the father becomes the beloved symbol of God's pursuing, non-stop, shatter-proof love for the world and for each one of us.

Think of the audacity of God that God should make us free and insist that we exercise our freedom and when we foul it up, God takes us back and takes the risk that we will foul it up again. A cartoon in the New Yorker magazine shows a father looking as his son and saying, "Son, this is the third fatted calf we've killed for you. When are you going to settle down?" There's always that risk and God knows it; but God would rather have it that way, than for us to sell or hand over our freedom to something less than God. Amen.