

“The Freedom that Matters Most”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian
(Fourth of July weekend)
Rev. Kit Billings
July 5, 2020

Scripture

Psalm 119:33-40, 44-45

John 8:31-36

Hymns or Songs

"Battle Hymn of the Republic"

"America the Beautiful"

Insight for Worship

True Christianity 504:7 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“Our free choice comes from our sense that we have life within us as if it were our own. God allows us to feel this way for the sake of our partnership [with Him]. A partnership with God would not be possible if it were not reciprocal, and it becomes reciprocal when we act freely, and completely as if we were on our own. If we were not allowed by God to feel this way, we would not be human and our life would not be eternal. Our reciprocal partnership with God is what makes us humans and not animals and enables us to live to eternity after death. What makes all this possible is our free choice in spiritual matters.”

This week I purposefully chose to write my sermon last night on July 4th. I did this because I wanted to wait until our skies were filled with myriads of fireworks exploding and booming all around me here in LaPorte. My expectations came true! From my family's new front porch facing southward, my wife and I could see a near constant barrage of multicolored fireworks raining down a rainfall of golden and silver shimmering lights.

Did you know that our annual 4th of July fireworks displays symbolize two things? First, they are an expression of celebration. History records it this way: “On July 1, 1776 delegates of the Continental Congress were in Philadelphia, debating over whether the 13 original colonies should declare their independence from Britain's Parliament as well as King George III. That night, news arrived that British ships had sailed into New York Harbor, posing an immediate threat to the Continental troops commanded by George Washington. On July 2, delegates from 12 colonies voted in favor of independence (New York would follow suit on July 9) and the motion carried.” (www.History.com) On July 3, an impassioned John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, “I am apt to believe that [our

Declaration of Independence] will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival...It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with...Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other, from this Time forward forever more.” (Ibid.)

The second thing our fireworks represent are the many, many fiery-works or actions of warfare (caused by musket, pistol and cannon fire) that took place over a long seven-year time span before Great Britain’s General Cornwallis surrendered to our General George Washington on October 19, 1781. History records that Cornwallis gave up his army of some 8,000 men at Yorktown, Virginia, giving up any chance of winning the Revolutionary War. It was after witnessing the bombardment of Ft. McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore that Francis Scott Key wrote his lyrics that stand immortal to what became our National Anthem: “the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air....”

Last night, I stood there on our front porch, giving thanks to God for our American ancestors, both soldiers and civilians, both men and women, who fought and worked very hard against the injustice and tyranny of Britain’s Parliament and her royalty in order to be able to pursue a pathway of “life, liberty (or freedom) and the pursuit of happiness.” They fought for the very political and economic freedoms we all enjoy today, including freedom from unfair taxation, which was the cause of the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Among the official indictments against the King of England and their Parliament were these stated within our Declaration:

“He [the King] has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

“He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

“For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us: For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States.

“For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world.

“For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent.

“For depriving us in many cases, of the benefit of Trial by Jury.”

And the last of a long list of indictments against the crown stated: “In every stage of these Oppressions, we have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

Truly my friends, our foremothers and forefathers knew they had a tyrannical “tiger by the tail” in George III, and they were ready to go to war in favor of exercising their Right as human beings to exercise good judgment based within political and religious freedom. But one could ask quite reasonably, where does our ardent passion for freedom come from within us?

New Church theology gives us great insight into this powerful aspect of our innate humanness. It says that our passion for freedom flows into us directly from God by His most amazing gift to us all, the pure sense and feeling within us “that we have life within us as if it were our own. God allows us to feel this way for the sake of our partnership [with Him].” (TCR 504:7) In fact, it is our innate, God-given passion for *spiritual freedom* that makes us what we are, being made in the image and likeness of God. Spiritual freedom, you see, is our glorious ability to want to and to be able to *choose between goodness and evil and between truth and falsehoods*, which lay at the heart of America’s choice to go to war with the tyrants in Britain.

Our theology informs us that this is one of the highest of God’s concerns, to provide for and protect every human being’s power and ability to choose between right and wrong every day of our eternal existence. What most Christians may not be aware of, is that over a hundred years before Emanuel Swedenborg was born, the Lutheran Church of Europe (which held sway over many countries back then) published its “Formula of Concord” that totally denounced human beings as having any ounce or substance of God-given goodness within. This was the formal Protestant Church’s declaration that until God’s Spirit was allowed entrance into our inhuman minds through conversion through faith alone, every person born on Earth was and is inherently “bad to the bone.”

Our theology quotes this rather horrifying document, ratified by the Lutheran Church in 1577 in Dresden, Germany:

We are utterly corrupt and dead to what is good, so that in our nature after the Fall but before our regeneration, not the least spark of spiritual power remains that would enable us to prepare ourselves for the grace of God, or to accept it once it was offered, or to make room for grace by ourselves and on our own, or to understand, believe, comprehend, think, will, start, finish, enact, work, or cooperate in spiritual matters, or to adapt or accommodate ourselves to grace, or to contribute anything to our own conversion, by half or to the least extent. In spiritual matters, which concern the salvation of our souls, we are like Lot’s wife when she became a pillar of salt, and like a log or a stone, devoid of life, which has no functioning eyes, mouth, or senses.

Toward this tyranny of heavy-handed doctrine New Church theology stands far apart; in fact one could say that the Second Coming of Christ, which began on April 6,

1744, was a declaration of independence from the massive falsities commissioned in Dresden in 1577. It was a passionate Swedish mystic and theologian who wrote this in defiance of the Formula of Concord: “If we had no free choice in regard to spiritual matters, what would we be but brute animals? Spiritual free choice is what distinguishes us from them. Without it, what is the church but a cleaner of clothes with a filthy face and blank, blind eyes? Without it, what is the Word but a volume entirely without meaning? What occurs more often in the Word than statements and commandments that we should love God and our neighbor and have faith? Or that our salvation and life depend on our level of love and faith? No one lacks the ability to understand and do the things that are prescribed in the Word and in the Ten Commandments. How could God order and command us to do such things if we had not been given the ability to do them?” (Ibid. 503:6)

What our theology is saying, in essence, my friends is that first and foremost you and I and everyone on Earth is a *cherished human being*, and all are born for Heaven and deserving of God’s love. At the same time this means that God has and always will honor our choices because a God of pure Love-and-Wisdom can only create us to form a reciprocal relationship and partnership with us—one that depends upon us working cooperatively with God, who empowers us to allow Heaven to form in us daily.

Does this mean that humanity’s love affair with evil and our desire to control and dominate each other (demonstrated long ago by King George III) has no effect on us at birth? No, there are very impacting inherited evil inclinations handed down to us from long ago, and from our own family’s selfish and hurtful habits. We do have an inherited tendency toward hard-heartedness and many other evils—things like willful stubbornness against God, racism, militarism, and materialism to name a few. But to think and teach people that we are “bad to the bone” and 100% corrupt.....NO! That is taking it way too far. To teach that human beings have become completely spiritually corrupt is saying that God has failed at His role as our Divine-Good Shepherd, and that my friends, is impossible.

New Church theology teaches us that the Lord our God **loves us all way beyond our ability to comprehend**, actually, and at various times in our life journey we shall personally experience the Lord’s lovingkindness and His pure Love for us. And from the Lord’s Divine Love He makes sure that our hearts and minds stand within a central spiritual equilibrium—an awesome *spiritual freedom*, which the Lord protects and safeguards with perfection. God protects our spiritual freedom so that every one of us has the ability to **freely** make our choices throughout our lives to live in harmony with God’s Word of Life or to choose against it, in favor of hellish motives and enjoyments. This means that every day of life we will be met with both the forces of Heaven and the forces of Hell around us and within us. But, it also means that the Lord

will subconsciously fill you with all of the love, goodness and passion to follow Him faithfully...even when things are at their worst. Our reading in *Psalm 119* underlines this beautifully. Notice how it reads: “Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. ³⁶ Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!”

The only thing God forces upon you is that relatively speaking, *you will be held in balance like a teeter totter, with you standing in the middle*. Neither the Lord, His angels nor the devils of Hell will be allowed to force you toward Heaven or Hell: that choice stands as your own! Today and every day, praise God, you are being lovingly given your deeply human right to feel as if the life-force inside of you is your own, making you spiritually free to make your choices, making you *beautifully human*. The one thing you are forced to do, is to...CHOOSE. You cannot avoid making your choices, every day, every hour...indeed, every moment of your life! So, *choose well*, God tells us. Choose to love Him most of all, and your neighbor as yourself. Use your spiritual freedom wisely and side with the “tree of life,” rather than the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”—and oh yes, the Lord and His angels are with you always, to help you to do this—BUT, they won’t ever stand in the way of your freedom...the *freedom that matters most*.

On our Independency Day Sunday, may we celebrate the deepest freedom that matters the most—our freedom to choose to let the Lord teach us His statutes and spiritual laws as we meditate on God’s Holy Word. Yes, we can cooperate with the Lord and allow Him to lead us in paths of right and good living. We can long for the Lord’s precepts, which enables Him to lead us into ever wider pathways of goodness, as we are regenerated by God into people who enjoy being useful toward each other and to our community. It was Christ our Lord who said, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**” (John 8:34-36)

Amen.

Psalm 119:33-40,45 (ESV)

Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes;
and I will keep it to the end.

³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.

³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

³⁶ Incline my heart to your testimonies,
and not to selfish gain!

³⁷ Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;
and give me life in your ways.

³⁸ Confirm to your servant your promise,

that you may be feared.
³⁹ Turn away the criticism that I dread,
 for your rules are good.
⁴⁰ Behold, I long for your precepts;
 in your uprightness give me life!
⁴⁴ I will keep your law continually,
 forever and ever,
⁴⁵ and I shall walk in a wide place,
 for I have sought your precepts.

John 8:31-36 (ESV)

The Truth Will Set You Free

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered Him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"
³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

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