

**Headmaster's Remarks
Upper School Chapel
May 4, 2005**

Psalms 37: 3-4

**Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.**

Matthew 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Freedom!!

Ernest Gordon, who was Dean of the Chapel at Princeton when I was a student there in the 1970's, told an extraordinary story of freedom and sacrifice (see Gordon, To End All Wars, Grand Rapids, 2002 and Jill Carattini, "The Course of Waterfalls," April 28, 2005, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries). Gordon served as an officer during World War II and in his early twenties, he was captured by the Japanese and put to work in an horrific prison camp. The prisoners in this prison camp were forced to build a railroad through harsh and hot jungles in Burma. They were treated like animals and literally hundreds of men died each day. Beatings and torture were common and as often happens amidst these terribly inhuman circumstances, the prisoners mistreated one another. They often stole from one another in an effort just to survive. And, who could blame them? They were treated like animals and so they acted like animals.

One evening, a prison guard discovered that a tool was missing. The guard would not let the prisoners leave the railroad tracks where they were working and to go back to camp until the thief confessed his deed. Initially and understandably, no one stepped forward because immediate death was the sure punishment. When no one confessed the crime, the guard then threatened to kill all the prisoners on this work detail. With this very real threat looming, a young soldier stepped forward to confess and he was killed right away before his fellow prisoners.

When the prisoners and guards returned to the camp, it was discovered that no tools were missing. A guard had miscounted. An innocent soldier had stepped forward, and had given his life to save the lives of his fellow prisoners. Ernest Gordon tells us that when it became known that one among them had laid down his life for the others, the spirit in the prison camp changed immediately and profoundly. The prisoners changed from an "everyone for himself" mentality to demonstrating genuine concern and love for one another. The prisoners started to reach out to one another, to help the weak, to nurse the sick. The powerful act of love and self-sacrifice by the prisoner who confessed to a theft he did not commit dramatically lifted the spirit and morale of the other men. He saved them through his sacrifice and he gave further witness to what Victor Frankl witnessed amidst the desperate circumstances of the Nazi concentration camps when he saw his fellow inmates sharing food, encouragement, and love amidst almost certain death. For Frankl, many of his fellow inmates in these barbaric camps demonstrated through their lives and spirit and love that **"everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to determine one's attitude in any given set of circumstance—to chose one's own way."** (Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, Washington Square Press, 1984, p. 86)

What is the ultimate purpose of freedom? (repeat) Don't stories such as those related by Ernest Gordon and Victor Frankl challenge us to think differently about freedom? Isn't the purpose of freedom perhaps to reach beyond ourselves? Does freedom indeed require that of us? Aren't Gordon and Frankl telling us that regardless of our surroundings—even horrible surroundings—we still have some measure of freedom and must exercise that freedom? At the very least, we can choose our attitude, choose our spirit, no matter how bad things are around us.

Are we free by our choice or are we free because God has blessed us with freedom? Are we free so that we can pursue our personal agendas and goals or are we free so that we can pursue lives centered in virtue and excellence and goodness or in our faith in a Higher Power? These questions about the origins of the gift of freedom and how we should use that gift have challenged humankind across the ages and it certainly challenges Americans living as we do in a culture obsessed at times with the present, with the self, with the individual, and with material possessions.

Materialism in and of itself is not the culprit in our efforts to understand and grasp freedom; rather, materialism is the result of a larger problem—a lack of imagination—“a poverty of ideas about the inner and outer world.” (Jacob Needleman, The American Soul: Rediscovering The Wisdom of the Founders, Penguin, 2002, p. 6) We have difficulty imagining and understanding those ideas and principles that take us outside ourselves and that help us, for example, understand that freedom is a transformational gift to be used for transformational purposes.

In this nation’s founding charter, the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson was very clear about his beliefs about the origins of freedom: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, **that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights**, that among these are Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness.”

In January 1961 as he was taking office as President, John F. Kennedy reminded us of the deep seated belief held by the founding fathers “**that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.**”

Freedom is an incredible gift bestowed on us by our Creator and we must use that gift to serve others and to serve God. Freedom is a powerful example of grace—a gift that humankind did not necessarily deserve or ask for but that was still given to us by a loving God. Indeed, the gift of freedom flows inexorably from the gift of life. And, as one pastor (John Claypool, The Hopeful Heart, Morehouse, 2003, p. 75) reminds us, “None of us did anything to earn our way into this wonder of aliveness. Our entrance into history was sheer windfall”—a gift pure and simple. And, our freedom is a bonus on top of the windfall of life itself.

Sadly, those of us who enjoy freedom are in the minority in this world and therefore—I would argue—we are obligated humbly and intentionally to use our freedom in ways that serve larger purposes. As the beneficiary of this grace-filled gift of freedom, should we not exercise that freedom in ways that “enlarge the circle of hope” for others? (Andrew Delbanco, The Book of The Real American Dream—A Meditation on Hope, Harvard, 1999, p. 109) Let me urge us to use our freedom to pursue a life of the mind, a life of the soul, a life of service. Consider these words by one of my favorite contemporary philosophers, Jacob Needleman: Listen carefully.

“Throughout history, ideas of a certain kind and nature have been disseminated into the life of humanity in order to help human beings understand and feel the possibility of the deep inner change that would enable them to serve the purpose for which they were created, namely, to act in the world as conscious, individual instruments of God, the ultimate principle of reality and value. Ideas of this kind are formulated in order to have a specific range of action on the human psyche: to touch the heart as well as the intellect; to shock us into questioning our present understanding; to point us to the greatness around us in nature and the universe, and the potential greatness slumbering within ourselves; to open our eyes to the real needs of our neighbors; to confront us with our own profound ignorance and our criminal fears and egoism; to show us that we are not here for ourselves alone, but as necessary particles of divine love.” (Needleman, p. 6)

Freedom! We ask God to let us all remember freedom’s power for good and evil. Let us remember its source and giver. Let us remember its purposes and life-changing possibilities. And let’s all remember the responsibilities freedom places on us all as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, friends, citizens to be faithful stewards of God’s creation and commandments including the Great Commandment to love our God and our neighbor.

Billy Peebles