

“Chickens, Ducks, Carrots and a Lesson on Christian Freedom”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Text: Luke 12:13-21

*“And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years;
relax, eat, drink, be merry.”*

~ Luke 12:19

Prayer

**God of this new day,
Speak to us once again through the words of Jesus.
May we hear the whispers of your Holy Spirit
In this time of reflection
And feel strengthened and empowered
To walk wisely with you and one another. Amen.**

Summertime always brings back some of the most cherished memories of my childhood. I loved to spend part of my summer vacation on my grandfather’s farm. Back then, summer on the farm was defined by lazy sunny days when “too hot” meant that the temperature had reached the mid-80’s and by cool evenings that were perfect for late night games on the porch and also by the occasional shenanigans I got myself into when no one was paying attention. I will never forget the summer I landed in hot water for swapping the eggs under a broody hen for the eggs of a broody duck. Several days after the stealthy eggs switch, I was caught red-handed by my mother as I watched with a bit of mischievous delight the hen panicking on the edge of the small pond while her brood of ducklings went for a leisurely swim. I’m sure the mother duck was equally dumbfounded every time her baby chicks refused to follow her into the water.

My grandfather was willing to forgive what he called a “minor boyish offense,” but my mother would have none of it. I was grounded for the rest of the week. Worse still, before I was sent to the bedroom to reflect on my actions, I had to sit and listen to what felt like an interminable lecture on the difference between “freedom” and “responsibility.” Mother’s impassioned monologues were punishment enough. I actually pleaded with her to give me a good spanking and get the whole thing over with, but, no, she wouldn’t let me walk away that easily.

At the time, I could not fully appreciate the invaluable lesson my mother was teaching me, but now, almost 44 years later, I am grateful for that moment of maternal tough love that got me thinking about my freedom to choose my actions and the responsibility that comes with that freedom.

All of us love our freedom. In America, perhaps more than in any other country, freedom is fiercely guarded as a fundamental value. Ever since the Founding Generation enshrined some of the noblest ideals of freedom in the foundational documents of the nation, Americans have celebrated the 4th of July as a universal triumph of freedom. James Madison worked furiously to safeguard that hard-won liberty in the Bill of Rights and, for two centuries, our society has cherished the First Amendment with its guarantee of freedom of religion, expression, peaceful assembly, freedom of the press and the freedom to petition the government. Jewish-American poet Emma Lazarus eternalized the ambitious longing of the American heart for freedom with soaring words that have become integral to the very definition of what America stands for in the community of nations. Lazarus' sonnet "*New Colossus*," which is engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty, affirms and declares America's vocation to offer a "**world-wide welcome**" to human beings "**yearning to be free**."¹ And for 246 years, the overwhelmingly majority of Americans have taken great pride in the idea that this is the land of the free, they have believed and fought for the cause of liberty and have claimed freedom as a national birthright.

But what is it? What is this liberty that we all love so much and argue over so passionately and disagree about so intensely and pursue so eagerly? What is this freedom we believe human beings crave, thirst, ache and yearn for?

Individual choice. I think that if we were asked to distill what we mean by freedom into only two words, these two would most likely be the ones most of us in worship this morning would settle on – individual choice. For hundreds of people attending church today, I would venture to say that the individual's ability to choose is the highest expression of liberty. In our collective psyche, to be free has everything to do with the right to choose to be who we want to be, to live the way we want, to go where we like, to say what we think, to practice our religion and to go after our dreams with minimum or no meddling from the government or anyone else. If there is one thing that we all probably agree on is that freedom demands the right to have and make choices free of coercion. But we have seen how this simplistic understanding of freedom can be problematic. During the most serious public health crisis in our lifetime, we have watched people all over the world, especially in Europe and America, frame the act of mask-wearing as one of personal liberty. While they and those closest to them remained at risk for severe illness, most people made the choice to accept the inconvenience of masking although a few never put on a mask despite overwhelming evidence that masks do save lives. Then, as soon as the vaccines and boosters became available, the vast majority decided they were tired of the discomfort of face-coverings and ditched them. If they inadvertently get or spread COVID, oh well, with vaccination and medication the infection appears to be no worse than the common cold. What matters is their individual freedom to live as they choose. It is clear that masking has never been a choice most people made for the sake of society, public health or the common good, but only and mostly to protect themselves and the small circle of loved ones around them.

When freedom is restricted to individual choice only, the concept of an ethic of the common good takes a back seat to the notion of radical individualism where it is virtually impossible to convince people that our freedom is not limitless. There are occasions when we all have to be willing to give up some of our freedom and some of our personal choices for the well-being of our society, for the protection of people we do not know, for the sake of the environment and for the right balance between individual liberties and the common good.

On that pleasant summer day on my grandfather's farm, I thought I was just doing a fun experiment with the chicken and duck, but my mother tried to help me understand that in fact I was using my freedom irresponsibly. And here lies the fundamental difference between the ethic of individual choice and the ethic of the common good. Individual choice insists that the goal of life is to become capable of standing on our own two feet to claim the personal liberties to which we believe we are entitled, and other people must respect. The common good reminds us that we share the world with other human beings and creatures. It compels us to be irrevocably committed to protecting and preserving the rights, dignity, freedom and lives of all human beings as well as the environment. The common good places on us the responsibility for the ways we make choices and use our freedom. The ethic of the common good makes us face something that may sound deeply un-American to many of us, which is that freedom is less about asserting and exercising our individual choices and more about shouldering our responsibility for each other.

There is something deeply Christian about the ethic of the common good. When someone in today's Gospel lesson appeals to Jesus to take his side on a dispute over family inheritance, Jesus refuses to participate in a contentious society where people selfishly look only after their own interests, desires, rights and well-being. The person in the crowd was trying to co-opt Jesus into placing his validation on the side of his own claim, but Jesus turns the man's request into an opportunity to remind those around him that human beings are capable of something bigger and better than selfishness, self-interest and an unexamined pursuit of their own happiness. Rather than focusing on the individual, Jesus speaks of the true Christian freedom that creates new possibilities for human relationships by avoiding the downward spiral toward self-absorption while increasing our capacity for life in community.

The Parable of the Rich Fool is not a downright rejection of a person's right or freedom to enjoy the benefits of her work, creativity, investments, or wealth. The landowner in the story is not called a fool for having an abundant harvest. Jesus chooses to tell this story because he wanted to emphasize the foolishness of a person who is fully aware of his freedom to do whatever he wishes with his money, his success, his security, comfort and privilege but never asks himself once if he has the responsibility to share part of his wealth and prosperity with those who would never be able to eat, drink, relax and be merry unless he intentionally bound his well-being to the well-being of other people in his society. Jesus knew that the common good would not just happen by itself. So, he leaves this parable as a reminder to the Church that it is the responsibility of people of faith, of his

followers, of all Christians to speak about, advocate for and work toward the common good. This short parable holds one of Christianity's most challenging messages, that we think of ourselves not only as individuals endowed with the freedom to do what is good for ourselves, but also as followers of Christ who are part of a diverse world where we have the responsibility to care for one another.

Imagine what would happen if the rich, millionaire, and billionaire fools of today thought seriously about their responsibility for the well-being of all the 50 million Americans who struggle to put food on their table. Imagine if we all agreed that no one should go hungry in the wealthiest nation in human history. Think for a moment what would happen if Christians all around the world decided to petition governments to do more to feed every single one of the 140 million people on Earth who are only one step away from being hungry this morning. According to the Forbes' list of the richest people on the planet, there are 2,668 billionaires in the world who are worth a collective of \$12.7 trillion dollars.² If they gave back to the common good of humankind even 1% of their wealth on a yearly basis, which would be roughly \$127 billion dollars, we could eradicate extreme poverty on every continent. No one in America or in the world needs to be hungry or homeless, thirsty or unclothed, poor or uneducated, diseased and unmedicated. We have the resources, the technology, and the freedom right now to improve the conditions of life for every person on the planet without doing more harm to the environment, we just find it easier to focus on the much needed but temporary relief provided by food banks, shelters and soup kitchens. But Jesus insists that we have the responsibility to use our freedom thoughtfully, wisely, faithfully, prophetically and even daringly to encourage each other not to just celebrate our good life, wealth and our individual choices but to imagine what we can do to live in a world where every human being can eat, drink, relax, feel safe, and live a full and meaningful life.

And perhaps a good place to start living responsibly is right here at Acton Congregational Church. You may not include yourself in the definition of "rich," but if your household makes more than \$170,000 in annual income, you are at the top 20% of income earners³ in a country where at least 40 million people live below the poverty line.⁴ If you take all your assets – savings, investments, houses, cars and subtract any debt – and your net worth is at least \$500 thousand dollars, you are among the 20% richest people in the freedom-loving population of America.⁵ If you take a step back and look at the whole world, you can consider yourself part of the richest 1% on Earth if you are single and make \$35,000 dollars a year after taxes. I don't think I would be making an overstatement if I said that our congregation is wealthy on a variety of metrics. We are among the people who have the privilege of eating, drinking, relaxing and being merry without ever being afraid that we might not have enough to eat and drink tomorrow. We do have our own personal worries and troubles, but we can often say to ourselves, "**Self, you've done well! You are free to take it easy and enjoy life.**" And honestly, there is nothing wrong about knowing how blessed and rich we are and to enjoy our good life... But then we come to worship, and we hear those words Jesus said more than 2,000 years ago: "**Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.**"⁶

Friends, our religion insists that we use our Christian freedom to remind the Church and our society that human beings are capable of rising above our love for our individual liberties to think globally about the well-being of the human race and our planet. We can choose to care for our neighbors and work for the common good of all creation. This call to be responsible may sound daunting, but we can begin by taking small steps. We can wear a face mask indoors at public spaces during this new wave of the Omicron subvariant. We can give to grassroots organizations that are working to end hunger. We can put hyper-partisanship aside and call our elected officials to make them aware that we support the White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health. The goal of this conference is to end hunger in America by 2030. We can get behind this initiative. We can ask ourselves how our wealthy congregation can do more for the common good. We can pray that God may show us how to use our freedom responsibly to extend freedom to others. We can begin with small steps.

the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello who became known for his powerful wisdom stories, once told a story about ***“An old woman [who] died and was taken to the judgment seat by the angels. While examining her records,..., the judge could not find a single act of charity performed by her except for a carrot she had once given to a starving beggar. Such, however, is the power of a single deed of love that it was decreed that she be taken up to heaven on the strength of that single carrot. The carrot was brought to court and given to her. The moment she caught hold of it, it began to rise as if pulled by some invisible string lifting her up toward the sky. A beggar appeared. He clutched the hem of her garment and was lifted along with her. A third person caught hold of the beggar’s foot and was lifted too. Soon there was a long line of persons being lifted up to heaven by that carrot. And strange as it may seem, the woman did not feel the weight of all those people who held on to her. In fact, since she was looking heavenward, she did not see them. Higher and higher they rose until they were almost near the heavenly gates. That’s when the woman looked back to catch a last glimpse of the earth and saw this whole train of people behind her. She was indignant. She gave an imperious wave of her hand and shouted, “Off! Off all of you! This carrot is mine!” In making her imperious gesture, she let go of the carrot for a moment, and down she fell with the entire train.”***⁷

Friends, our lives will not be measured by our individual choices or by our wealth but by our willingness to sacrifice some of our freedom, some of our choices, some of our personal goals, and some of our self-interest, some of our prosperity for the sake of the common good. Jesus instructed us to be ***“rich towards God.”*** I think what he meant is that when we stop thinking only about ourselves and consider the hunger, thirst, poverty and health of our neighbors, we take a step closer to God. We begin to rise towards heaven. We find that even a simple act of sharing a carrot with another human being can alleviate hunger, can lift someone up, can bring hope into the world. I remember the words of Paul to the church in Galatia, ***“you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.”***⁸ We will rise or fall on our ability to shoulder the

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responsibility the Gospel places on us to use our freedom for the common good of all people whom God loves. Sisters and brothers, use your Christian freedom well and responsibly. This is Christ's hope for our lives and for our church.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Emma Lazarus in New Colossus, poets.org.

² Edited by Kerry A. Dolan and Chase Peterson-Wothhorn in World's Billionaires List in 2022, [<https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>]

³ By Samuel Stebbins in What does it take to be considered rich in your state? Less in some such as Mississippi and West Virginia, Money, USA TODAY, 20 November 2020 [<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/11/20/income-it-takes-to-be-considered-rich-in-every-state/114967522/>].

⁴ Oxfam in Poverty in the USA, [<https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/countries/united-states/poverty-in-the-us/>].

⁵ By Tanza Loudanback in The net worth it takes at every age to be richer than most people you know, Personal Finance, Insider, 21 August 2019 [<https://www.businessinsider.com/personal-finance/net-worth-to-be-wealthy-at-every-age-2019-8>].

⁶ Luke 12:15, the Message.

⁷ Anthony de Mello in Taking Flight, pp. 137-138.

⁸ Galatians 5:13.