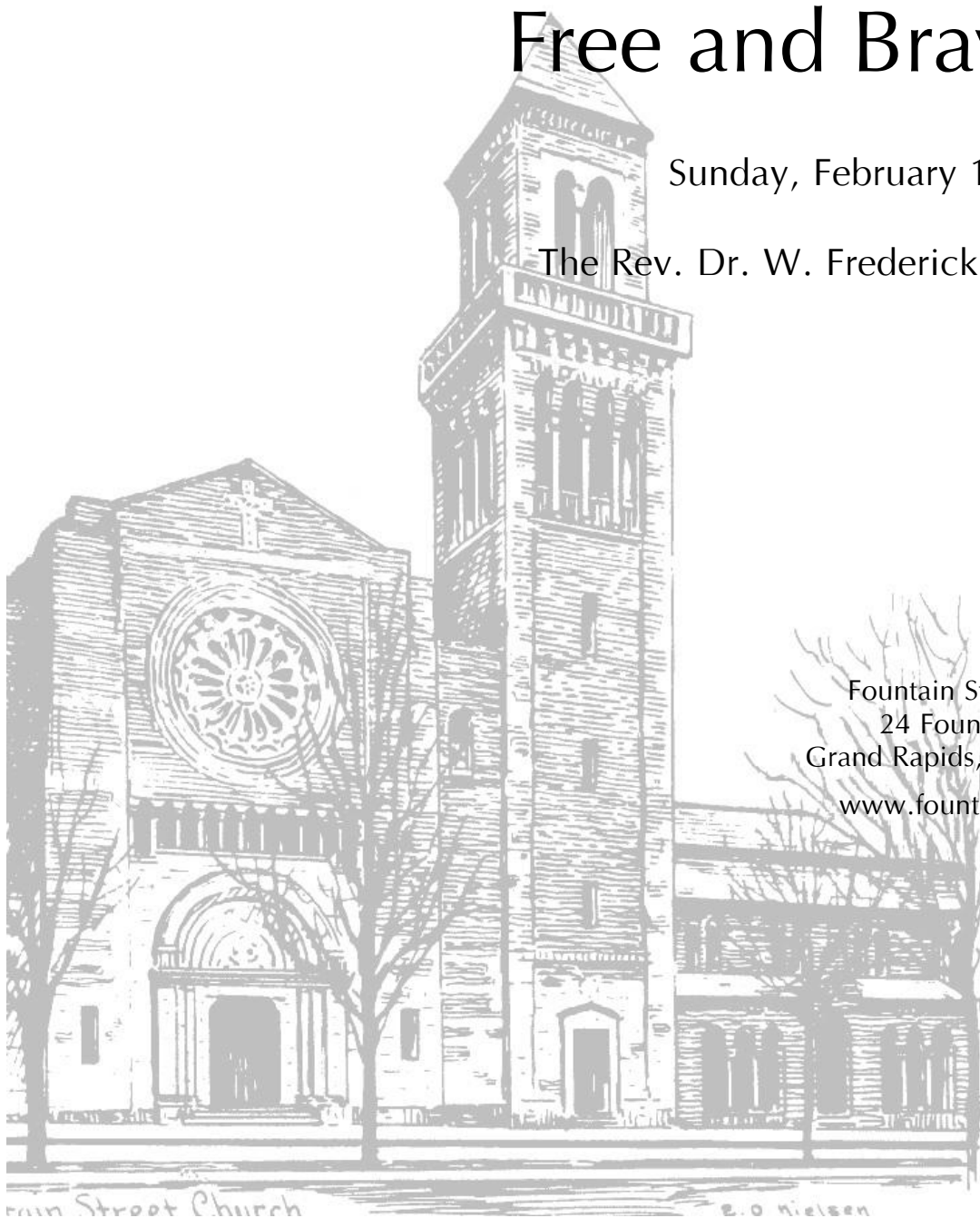


“Are We Truly Free and Brave?”

Sunday, February 15, 2009

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“Are We Truly Free and Brave?”

READINGS

Stanzas on Freedom - James Russell Lowell - Written in 1843.

“Men! whose boast it is that ye
Come of fathers brave and free,
If there breathe on earth a slave,
Are ye truly free and brave?
If ye do not feel the chain,
When it works a brother's pain,
Are ye not base slaves indeed,
Slaves unworthy to be freed?...”

“This is the highest wisdom that I own; freedom and life are earned by those alone who conquer them each day anew.” – *Goethe*

“Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.” *Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

I Chronicles 28:20 – “And David said to Solomon his son, Be strong and of good courage, and do it: fear not, nor be dismayed: for the Lord God, even my God, will be with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee, until thou hast finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord.”

“Abraham Lincoln did not go to Gettysburg having commissioned a poll to find out what would sell in Gettysburg. There were no people with percentages for him, cautioning him about this group or that group or what they found in exit polls a year earlier. When will we have the courage of Lincoln?”

- *Robert Coles*

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SERMON

It was a real Dickens week – meaning the best of times and the worst of times.

In terms of best we had a dose of spring on Tuesday, with sunshine and temperatures into the 60s. The next day was the actual bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin. On Friday winter came back but we had a memorable memorial service for Bev Howerton who was the music director here for decades. That afternoon I led a demonstration at the county building on behalf of marital equality that made the news.

In terms of the worst of times the power went out just before that memorial service, meaning we had no organ music for Bev’s service. We are in the midst of a national “power outage” with the economy slumping and political polarizing. And along with our own power outage that needs to be fixed there is a genuine financial challenge before us as a church.

But what made my week great was my son. He is a high school senior, which means college is on the horizon. The guidance office called him in to say he was qualified for a scholarship based on three measure – grades, leadership and need. They needed to know if we were in need, especially compared to the next kid in line. He said we were not and declined the offer. Can a parent have a greater moment than when a child lives by principles even when it costs him recognition and money? I told him how proud I was but he shrugged it off. “It was the right thing to do,” he said. Easy. But in a world that prizes winning as everything, to do right when it costs you something is truly courageous.

This month has been about oppression, especially the oppression we carry within us – oppressions of the mind, the heart and today the soul. In ancient times the oppression of the soul was called *acedia*, meaning a listlessness of purpose, very like depression but of a moral nature. Alan Bloom came close to it in his “Closing of the

American Mind" in decrying a fashionable nihilism in which everything is meaningless. When nothing matters, there is no value to anything, and thus nothing good or bad.

That would make my son's actions stupid. If nothing matters, then being good or doing good is self-destructive. Why give someone else something that could benefit you? It takes an act of will, which the nihilist would call delusional, to say that some things have value in addition to me. It becomes courage when acting on that costs you something – money, advantage, power, status.

Courage only matters when something you esteem is at stake and serving it puts you at risk. The soldier in battle, the firefighter in a burning house are obvious examples. If they thought nation or human life were meaningless they would not be putting their own lives in harm's way. I do not equate my son's choice with those acts, but it is an act of courage to serve your values when they cost something. Let me go further. Something has value only when we put our own value up to protect it.

Spiritual liberty is the tap root of this place and liberal religion wherever it rises. Everyone here has a story of what it cost to obtain and keep that liberty. For those who came here from another religious community, the cost was sometimes dear – faith, friends, family. For those who grew up here, or in other places like this, there was a similar cost in lost friendships, misunderstanding, even rejection. We here are literally formed by personal acts of spiritual courage. We know what Thomas Paine meant when, in urging the colonies to independence, he said, "Tyranny like hell is not easily conquered yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly. It is dearness only that gives everything its value."

Courage, the act of self-risk, is what makes something worthwhile. As Clare Booth Luce noted, "Courage is the ladder on which all the other virtues mount." There is no cure for spiritual and moral bondage except will and courage. Like those facing oppressions from without, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed," even when we oppress ourselves. Millions of atheists and skeptics sit in Christian churches this morning, alongside closeted gays and other outcasts. They are there because of family, tradition, habit, and other of Thoreau's quiet desperations. Most will stay there. They know what Goethe said, "Freedom and life are earned by those alone who conquer them each day anew" and ask "Who wants to do that much work?"

We do. Because we know that the effort creates the value. Whatever matters, matters because we make it matter. Now, traditional religion says that God is what matters, so to say we humans make things matter sounds irreligious, self-absorbed, arrogant. I disagree.

From the pages of *Torah* we learn that we are the image of God to whom the world was given to till and keep. That's a value-adding mission. An old joke says the city slicker went for a drive in the country, pausing at a farm stand where he remarked to the farmer "What a beautiful place this is, the pastures and trees and crops - truly God's country." To which the farmer dryly responds, "You shoulda seen it before I pitched in."

From the words of gospel we know that the Kingdom of God is within us. Every oppression we struggle to remove is a yoke we have given ourselves – from racism and sexism and heterosexism to hatred and shame and fear. Call it sin, call it neurosis, call it hubris, call it ignorance, we put them there. To expect God to remove them is moral cowardice. We put them there and we must remove them.

The question is not whether we can, but whether we have the courage to try.