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## *What Do You Plan To Do With Your One Wild and Precious Life?*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Proper 8 – Year B**

*And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5: 34)*

I was sitting in our 12:15 service one day, when the presiding priest announced that we would be using an older order of service than the one that we normally used. I picked up two prayer books, turned in each to the less familiar service, and handed one of the books to a friend of mine who happened to be sitting next to me.

He looked at me, smiled, and said, "Now, George, you know that I don't need a prayer book."

My friend was John Miner.

John could recite all of the services in the prayer book from memory.

Many of you will remember John. He always seemed happy to see you and he loved to remind us all about the Holy Spirit.

John is no longer with us, but I think about him every Fourth of July. John and his beloved wife, Cecil, always came to the Cathedral for the blessing of the runners and the service that follows the race. And, John always dressed in yellow.

John may have held God, family, and country closer than Georgia Tech, but the Jackets were never far behind!

John knew that he had been blessed and he knew how to be a blessing to others.

That is to say, he knew how to give freely of himself.

We will be talking about freedom a lot this week.

It's key to how we think about ourselves.

The Declaration of Independence lauds freedom as an inalienable right.

The Constitution claims that its purpose is to secure the blessings of liberty.

Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that the Civil War was about "the new birth of freedom."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared that we would fight World War II in defense of what he called the "Four Freedoms."

Harry Truman argued that the Cold War was necessary to protect the free world.

It is not always clear, though, exactly what we mean when we talk about freedom.

Sometimes we talk about it as if freedom is just another word for liberal democracies and free markets. These political and economic structures have brought great prosperity to many of us. And, they do free many of us to make our own decisions about how to live our lives.

But, if you stop and think about it, when we talk about being “the land of the free” and “the cradle of liberty,” we are talking about more than just having the right to do what we want to do whenever we want to do it.

We are talking about becoming the kind of people we want to be.

And, when the conversation comes to the question of who we want to be, we tend to reach for the words and symbols of our sacred scriptures for guidance.

Do you remember the image of America as the “City on a hill?”

In 1630, the Puritan John Winthrop crossed the Atlantic to start a new life in the new world. He wrote a sermon titled, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in which he described America as the New Jerusalem. Drawing on Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, Winthrop said that we must consider ourselves like a “City upon a hill.”

This image has captured our collective imagination ever since.

In 1961, John Kennedy picked up this aspirational vision of America in a speech to the Massachusetts legislature that he delivered as he was leaving for his inauguration in Washington D. C.

Ronald Reagan used it repeatedly throughout his political career, often adding the word “shining” to the vision.

In 1989, Reagan said in his farewell address,

*But in my mind, it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans ... and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace.... And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. ... And she’s still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.*

We also turn to scripture when we are looking for hope to overcome our fears in the face of tragedy and loss.

In 1995, when Timothy McVeigh, motivated by anti-Semitism and white nationalism, bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people including 19 children, President Clinton said,

*Let us let our children know that we will stand against the forces of fear. Where there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death, let us honor life. As St. Paul admonished us, “let us not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Later, in 2001, President Bush stood in the National Cathedral only three days after the towers came down in New York City and said,

*Grief and tragedy and hate are only for a time. Goodness, remembrance, and love have no end. And the Lord of life holds all who die and all who mourn.*

In 2015, at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, after a young white nationalist murdered nine parishioners during a Bible study there, President Obama offered a eulogy for the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, one of the victims of that tragedy. He said,

*Grace is not merited. It’s not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings. Grace – as a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us for he has allowed us to see where we’ve been blind. He has given us the chance, where we’ve been lost, to find our best selves.... We have not earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency and shortsightedness and fear of each other, but we got it all the same. He gave it to us anyway. He’s once more given us grace. But it’s up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift.*

Yes, the freedom that our ancestors fought and died to protect is about more than just choice.

It's about more than just being able to do what we want to do whenever we want to do it, as long as we don't harm anyone else.

It's about becoming the kind of people we want to be.

We have always wanted to be, as Lincoln said at Gettysburg, a "new nation ... dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Freedom, as we have always thought of it, is tied up with the idea of equality – not just being equal in the eyes of the law, but being equal in the eyes of God.

Again, let's turn to the words and symbols of our sacred scripture for guidance.

In the portion of scripture assigned to us for today, the writer of the Gospel of Mark tells a story about two healings -- the healing of the bleeding woman and the healing of the daughter of Jairus.

I think that the story is more than just a healing story; I think it is a social commentary.

The story opens with Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, begging Jesus to heal his daughter. "Come and save my child," the leader says, "She is dying."

Jesus agrees to help Jairus, but the messiah then stops to do something else first.

He stops to engage the crowd that is gathering around him, and while among them a woman touches the hem of his garment and is healed of a disease that has left her personally and financially destitute.

The story closes with Jesus going to Jairus' daughter and bringing her back to life as well.

It is interesting to me that the bleeding woman has been suffering for twelve years, the same length of time that Jairus' daughter has been alive.

It is also interesting to me that Jesus calls the woman "Daughter" when he tells her that her faith has made her well.

It is as if Jesus is making the point that the destitute woman and the wealthy girl, though very different in the eyes of the world, are equal in the eyes of God.

And, Jesus seems to be saying that they are dependent on each other in ways that they hadn't previously realized.

In fact, he may be saying that the life of the twelve tribes of Israel is dependent on their taking care of each other.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, gives us another way to imagine what it means to be equal in the eyes of God.

He says that when we look into the face of another person, we are confronted by a mystery we cannot know or even fully understand.

What we do know is that the other person is carrying a word from God.

We do know that the other person is part of God's larger plan of salvation.

They have a gift to give, and God's plan of salvation will not be complete until they have given it.

It's up to us, then, to find a way to receive their gift.

It's up to all of us to find a way to be both givers and receivers of the gifts -- not just for the giver and not just for the receiver, but for the whole community.

That's what the Body of Christ looks like – a community of people who have found ways to give to and receive from each

other the gifts that God has given to them.

This is, I think, the kind of people we want to be.

As we celebrate the independence of our country this week, we will be giving thanks for freedom.

We will be giving thanks for all of those who have given of their lives so that we might receive the opportunities that we enjoy to become the kind of people we want to be.

We will be expressing our gratitude for the chance that we have been given to be what our ancestors were talking about when they talked about being a City on the hill, or a new nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, or the Body of Christ.

I can't think of any other time or any other place that I would rather be than right here, right now.

Freedom, as we know it, is more than just the right to make our own choices. It is also about giving our gifts to others, and finding a way for them to give their gifts to us.

So, as you celebrate this week -- waving flags, cheering on runners, and eating more barbecue than you should! -- I invite you to pause and reflect for a moment.

What is your gift?

What can you do to give more freely of yourself?

How can you help others to find and give you the gifts that they have to give?

Or, in the words of the poet, Mary Oliver, "What is it that you plan to do with you one wild and precious life?"

Amen.