



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

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### ***“Freedom to Follow”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*Matthew 4: 18-22; Mark 10: 17-21; John 1: 43-51*

*July 3, 2016*

It’s a loaded word – that word ‘freedom.’ It is, of course, the word that absorbs our national consciousness at this point every year, but it’s a loaded word. Freedom from what? For whom? Where and when and why? I’m simply not sure we always think the concept through to the end.

- We celebrate the freedom declared by our Colonial ancestors some 240 years ago and remember the battles they won to earn our ‘freedom from tyranny.’ But, we spend precious little time on the motives and dreams that grounded why it is they fought for it in the first place.
- Teenagers perpetually and increasingly battle for their ‘freedom’ from the control their parents have on their lives, only to grow a little older and quickly realize how little freedom their freedom would often actually afford them.
- And, we as Congregationalists, ceaselessly put forth this notion of freedom as one of the core tenets of our church life and faithfulness – the very heart of our Congregational Way of being a Church – but rarely consider anything more than the desire our Pilgrim ancestors held (and we maintain) to stand free from the control of outside ecclesiastical authorities.

My point, in all of this, is that ‘freedom’ is a loaded word – but with very little exception it seems that we never spend any time on the flip-side of the equation. Whether it is discussion of revolutionary rebellions against British rule, teenagers seeking release from parental authority, or Congregational worshippers celebrating freedom from denominational control, it seems that the vast majority, and sometimes all, of our dialog about freedom is about freedom FROM... Freedom *from* tyranny, freedom *from* parental authority, freedom *from* denominational control. It seems that our celebration and focus on freedom seems to revolve almost entirely around the question of that *from* which we are gaining our freedom, but we almost never, ever, take the time to consider what the freedom is FOR! Whether we realize it or not, our freedoms (in our country, in lives, in our Way of being a church) are not simply freedoms *from* some sort of control, they are freedoms *for* a purpose – and what I am suggesting today is that we spend far too little time on that side of the equation!

Now, as to the secular examples I've been using – I'll leave those theoreticals for another time and place. But, as for the Church, particularly for us as Congregationalists who proclaim freedom as such a core element of how we live out our faith, I will say that there are few things we overlook more consistently (and more to our detriment) than the simple question of what our freedom is for! And, that's where Leslie's hymn choice, for today, really jumped out to me on this weekend in which freedom is so much on the forefront of our minds.

There's a lot that one might do to unpack this notion of Jesus as the Lord of the Dance. I think the concept of dancing with Jesus is a fascinating one, and it may be an idea we come back to sometime down the road. I think we all too often tend to view and understand our ongoing relationship with Jesus as far more of a march, and fail to realize that it really is a dance. We tend to formalize our relationship with Jesus and encumber it with regimental structures that turn it into something of an orderly march, locked in step with Jesus as he instructs us down our path. But, the truth is that life in Christ is a dance – a give and take in which a pair of partners slowly learn of one another and grow with one another as the dance becomes ever-more intricate and beautiful as the experience and relationship between the dancers evolves. It will sometimes be a joyous waltz, it will sometimes be a comforting sway, and it will sometimes feel as though you are in the middle of a rave with bodies crashing into one another all around you. But, the dance will continue and the more you dance, the more beautiful it will all become.

There are many things about that notion of dancing with Jesus that truly jumped to me, but I have to say that, on this particular weekend in which the word freedom is so on our hearts and minds, I couldn't shake the much more simple and straightforward notion that, when you dance, someone has to take the lead! Now, I'm not a dancer in ANY sense of the word, but I know that as much as dancing is a give and take between partners striving to move seamlessly with one another to the music, someone in that partnership has to take the lead. Especially in the context in which nothing is scripted or pre-determined, one of the partners in the dance has to be the one to indicate to the other when you are going to move, twirl, spin, or any of the other 1,000 things you might do with one another in your dance. When you dance, someone is in the lead. And, as perfunctory and simple as it may sound, that is the FOR of our religious freedom!

When we speak of our Pilgrim ancestors in our Congregational Way I think we spend far too much time focusing on their desire to be free *from* the control of the Church of England. The truth was that they never had a desire to be free FROM anything – their motivation was entirely and completely centered on their desire to be free FOR the purpose of allowing Christ to be the lead in their lives as individuals, and the head of the life of the church.

I read those various passages from the Gospels this morning really as something of an anecdotal reminder of how frequently Jesus used those words 'follow me.' Jesus wants to dance with us. Jesus wants to engage with us in that intimate give and take through which we can increasingly grow in our ability to make the most of this life with which we have been blessed, but we have to let Jesus lead the dance!

The brutal truth is that, throughout our Congregational churches in the United States, our ever-present focus on our freedom FROM has led to an extraordinarily dysfunctional reality in so many of our congregations. Our ongoing focus on our freedom from ecclesiastical control has,

for decades, allowed for the increasing dominance of our notion that the purpose of the Pilgrim movement was, and thus the very core of our way is, freedom FROM control. But, the dirty little secret we don't often want to point out is that this focus on our tenet as freedom FROM control really means that it is freedom FOR me! If I'm in a church and a way of faithful living that is focused on freedom from outside control, what that really means is that I get that freedom for me! I get to do what I want...believe what I want...say what I want...get what I want...and on and on...because I am free from outside control and what that means is that this is all about me! And all the while, we continue to miss the essential point that the Pilgrim movement was never about freedom *from*, but always about freedom *for*!

I am staunch and ardent supporter of the Congregational Way of being a church, and of the freedom of the local church from external ecclesiastical authority that stands at the heart of that Way of being a church. But, I also stand here to remind all of us, that the purpose of that freedom, the FOR that stood behind the Pilgrim movement and stands behind our tradition today, is that we are free FROM those controls so that we can be free FOR the purpose of allowing Christ to be the Lord of our Dance. There are no greater privileges that we have in life than the freedoms we know in Christ – but there is also no greater responsibility than the profound truth that the very purpose of that freedom, the FOR, is that we might freely allow Christ to take the lead.