

“Free to the End of the Rope!”  
The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.  
July 3, 2005

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Sermon Text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I do want to thank all of you, who helped make our Salkehatchie, our Greenwood camp, housed here at Main Street, such a wonderful success last week. You'll be hearing more about that and more details, but we had so many helpers, physically, financially, and otherwise. We thank you for your support.

I also want to say I'm going to try my best to shorten my sermon and get to the essence of it so that we can finish. You promise to listen, I'll promise to be brief.

A man went into Saks Fifth Avenue to buy some pajamas, and he noticed on the pajamas, a label, which said, “Shrink resistant.” He wondered, “What does that mean? Do they shrink or don't they?” He asked the saleswoman, “What does it mean when a garment says it is shrink resistant? Does it shrink or not?” The lady said, “Sir, it means that it will shrink, but it really doesn't want to.”

You and I are not a pair of pajamas. We are free, moral agents. We can decide. We can set goals. We can, not only resist shrinkage, but we can grow and expand our lives. A young man was trying to convince his sweetheart to marry him. She continued to resist him. Finally, he said, “Honey, is there anyone else?” She replied, in a tone of desperation, “There must be.” Surely, she could do better!

It is important for us to believe that we have a choice and we can do better. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Thomas Hobson rented out horses in Cambridge, England, and he had a rule that the person renting the horse, no matter who they were, got the first horse standing closest to the stable door, no matter who they were, and soon people began using the expression, “Hobson's Choice,” which meant no choice at all.

Tomorrow, we celebrate freedom. Freedom that our very nation is founded on, and the principle that our creator has bestowed upon humankind, certain rights, and that happiness must be pursued within freedom and by making choices. The Declaration of Independence reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Yes, America was founded upon lofty goals and God-given rights. This is worth celebrating.

We mustn't confuse America with the Kingdom of God. Billy Graham just completed what is said to be his last crusade, in New York City, and there is an old story about an English Billy Graham Crusade where a lady accosted him after the crusade in London. She felt it was in poor taste to have George Beverly Shea sing an American patriotic song as a part of the crusade in London. He wondered what in the world she was talking about. She said she heard him sing, it took America to put the stars in place, it took America, and of course, he was singing, “It took a miracle.” That is not what she heard.

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Like all nations we have our problems. It wasn't America that put the stars in place. That was God's doing, and according to our founders in the Declaration of Independence, they granted us no rights. They merely recognized that we already are endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. So we live in a time and a place with relative freedom to grow and to go and to support with our choices and our talent and our wealth, the things we believe promote life and liberty and true happiness. Not just for ourselves, but for all, we believe that these rights belong to all people, all people who live and breathe and have hope. We should thank God for the awesome freedom we enjoy. Freedom makes our faith journey easier though we sometimes abuse it, and though we sometimes forget it, it's based upon the premise that our freedom must never impose upon the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of others. We don't live in a vacuum. We honor the flag, as we have, of the United States, and we give God thanks for everything for which she stands, and of course, we recognize that there is an even greater symbol of freedom than the flag. It is the cross upon which Jesus gave his life. In our pursuit of true life and liberty and happiness, we sometimes fall into hurtful habits and empty pursuits that end up nowhere. We sometimes use the rope of freedom to hang ourselves. Jesus seemed to recognize that, that in our faith sometimes we would wander off, and we would abuse free choices before we would understand who God is and what great love we have always waiting in his arms.

The prodigal son is the centerpiece of Jesus' teaching on misused freedom, and the promise that God waits with open arms for our return. You remember the story, and I won't go through the whole thing. An impudent boy comes to his father, and says to him, "Look, old man, I'm tired of staying on the farm. I want to see the city. I don't want to wait until you die to enjoy life. Give me my share of the inheritance now." The father ponders and says, "All right. If that is what you want, that is what you'll get." Remember, Jesus was seeking to say something to us about God in this story, and what he was saying is God loves us enough to let us go. God did not create robots. He created us in his image, and whatever else that may mean, one thing is certain, we are free moral agents. We make our own beds, to use a familiar adage, or we have more than enough rope to hang ourselves, to use another. God has also given each of us our inheritance. That inheritance takes many forms. We have amazing minds, and we can use them or we can waste them. We have remarkable bodies. We can keep them healthy, or we can abuse them. We have the gift of life and of time and of precious relationships. All are at our disposal, and sometimes we use them, not to pursue true life and real happiness, but to chase one momentary distraction after another until we reach the end of our rope, and we wonder, "How did I get here? What was I supposed to do with what I had and what I lost?"

Many things constrain our freedom. Time constrains our freedom. Race and sex and money to varying degrees constrain our freedoms. Fear and peer pressure constrain our freedom. Class and fashion sometimes constrain our freedom. Perhaps Jesus, who was beyond these things, was the freest man who ever walked the earth. He was constrained by none of these, but he was also roped and tied and yoked to God's will so Jesus was

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free from worldly constraints, but bound completely by God’s will and God’s love for us. Bound to walk up Golgotha. Bound by God’s love to take upon himself our sin and our death. We are all yoked to something. We choose to bind up our lives by our wandering will and desires as the prodigal did or we come to ourselves and yoke ourselves to God’s will, and thus become free from the tyranny of self and the next wandering desire. What drove Jesus to give his life, teaching, preaching, healing and even dying for us? It was perfect freedom, and freedom comes with some pain and some cost, but it ends with love and is bound up with God and with others rather than singular self. Some of you come today bound to pain, not today’s, not of your own making, but sometime, somewhere, someone let you down, someone betrayed your trust, did you wrong, smeared your name in public, and you don’t like to think about it, and you don’t want to feel the anger anymore, but you do. You are not free from that pain because you have not yet forgiven. You are yoked to anger. You are yoked to hurt because you haven’t been able on your own to forgive, and you are not able on your own to forgive. You will need God’s help. Just one example of things that can keep us tied. You won’t even have the option of freeing yourself from old pain unless you pray God’s help to do God’s will and God sends his spirit to empower you to do so and to forgive. God can free. Freedom, inside here, matters more than the freedom to wander from one far country to another far country, admiring the new shades of pig slop, to take the Scriptural analogy too far. We are not free if we are bound to lust or bitterness or desire for things. Slavery does come in many forms, and we all serve some master, but perfect freedom comes now, as it has always come, in serving God, the God who always sends us out to others. If you’re not free in here to love, you are not free. You could own it all, and travel the earth over, and have the means to pay the bills when you get home, but still feel trapped and unfulfilled and empty because you are bound and enslaved to something less than God, something less than love. True freedom involves the creator God who desires for us life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is by that pursuit that we will find that goals, which are less than God, cannot satisfy.

Some forces in our culture do seem to seek to banish God from the equation. I heard an amusing story, but it’s also truth telling. I heard about a little fourth grader, who stood up to give a school report concerning the Pilgrims, and cautiously he said, “The Pilgrims came here seeking freedom of you know what and when they landed they gave thanks to you know who and because of them we can worship each Sunday you know where.” God created us, and gave us freedom and accountability. He gave us one another. He gave us himself in Jesus Christ, and we have also talents and we have gifts, and some of us use them and some misuse them, and some bury them and do nothing at all, but we do have choices. We are not puppets. We are not robots. We are human beings. That is what makes our lives so exciting and dangerous, both to ourselves and to God’s creation. God’s creation of us and giving us freedom, even the freedom to reject him, is perhaps God’s greatest gamble, and you’ll notice this theme throughout all of Jesus’ management parables. You’ll notice that the kings go away, and they leave their servants to work things out for themselves. They have the freedom to make their own decisions in the absence of the owner, and in the parables, it doesn’t ever go well. God left Adam to be

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manager of the earth, to till it and to subdue it, and God continually gives us the capacity and the responsibility of making decisions.

A Presbyterian, David Redding, says, “God has not deserted, but carried out a strategic retreat to provide mankind an opportunity to prove his stewardship.” He continues by saying, “We are under the eye, but not the thumb of God. We must make choices.” Dr. Tony Compallo tells about a sociological study of 50 people over the age of 95, and they were all asked just one question, “If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?” They could answer anything, but three answers rose to the top, over and over. They said, #1 If I had it to do over again, I would reflect more, and #2 If I had it to do over again, I would risk more, and #3 If I had it to do over again, I would do more things that would live on after I am dead. These folks, 95 and beyond, late in life, had gained the perspective of eternity, of something that lasts, something that lasts that shows compassion and love and concern for others. It would be a shame if we were to wait until it’s too late for us to use our freedom to do something for God and for others that lasts. The one thing the Scriptures indicate that lasts forever is love. We are free to choose life or death, love or hate or indifference, Heaven or Hell, whichever we choose, we must live with. There are consequences. God loves. God offers. We choose.

Paul Tournau, the great Swiss psychiatrist and theologian, emphasizes that Christianity is the only religion in the world that says God loves the unrighteous more than the righteous, rejoices at the homecoming of the sinner. There is one thing the father rejoices in more than virtue, and that is faith and trust. Freely choosing to trust God more than ourselves, to yoke ourselves to God because we trust him. Jesus stands at the door and knocks. We either open or sneak out the back and away. God will not force his way into our lives. God waits, awaits our decision to bind ourselves to him, to pursue true life in him, to use our liberty for him, to find our true happiness in him. Certainly, the most important choice in life is no Hobson’s choice. God has granted us the freedom to follow Christ or to reject him. There is something within the heart of every creature that wants to be free. Freedom is God’s plan for his children, but freedom is only as good as you use it. God wants free men and women to freely choose his love and to love others in his name, to yoke themselves to God and to others through the love of Jesus Christ. The end of that rope is true love, true life, true liberty, and true happiness. Amen.