

The last time I preached I took the liberty of not preaching directly from Scripture...

I took the liberty allowed by the Prayer Book and preached on a topic.

I am going to do the same thing this morning. Let me tell you a story...a personal one.

A number of years ago my wife and I were doing different things and were going to meet somewhere for dinner.

We decided to meet in a nice hotel bar and decide what we felt like eating.

I got there first and sat down at the bar and ordered Scotch on the rocks.

Just as it came a man came and sat down a bar stool away.

Now there were perhaps twenty people in the bar, all pretty nicely dressed...except the man next to me.

He had on a tank top, rather grubby jeans and black boots. Both arms were heavily tattooed, his hair unruly and he had a stubble. To add to the mix, he put out an odor reminiscent of gym clothes left unwashed in a locker. He smelled. A couple several seats from us moved to sit farther away

He ordered. The bartender retained a professional dead-pan expression and brought him a Scotch...

No ice, and ice-water on the side. He asked me what I was drinking. I told him and returned the question. He named an expensive Single Malt. He then launched into a kind of lecture about Single Malt Scotches and the different parts of Scotland that had different flavors. He knew a lot about Scotch Whiskey.

During the whole conversation I found myself wondering why he would come into this rather nice bar dressed as he was. And unwashed! Surely he knew how others would look at him and how he would stand out. Surely he knew many would find him offensive.

By this time I felt kind of familiar with him...even comfortable. So I screwed up my courage...and politely asked him.

And there, before my eyes was a transformation. From a friendly guy in a bar he turned into something like the Incredible Hulk.

He turned to me clenched and absolutely enraged. I was really frightened. He looked at me and said, through clenched teeth:

**“I got a right!”**

I mumbled... “Oh sure you do”...

He turned away and hunched over his drink.

Soon a nicely dressed young woman came in and he left with her.

Debbie came in, and we left for dinner.

But the whole experience, had left me shaken...

And I have thought about it for years.

To my question of “Why” he replied that he “Could”...

Did that mean that if he could then he must?

Ever since that encounter I have wondered:

Today we often speak of “rights.” Perhaps most often we refer to the First and Second amendments.

Free Speech and the Right to Bear Arms.

But what causes us to speak of “Rights” at all?

To begin with...there is no notion of “rights” in the Bible except referring to Marriage. Husbands and wives have certain “rights” in relation the each other. There is, in first century Greek a word for “rights”. The word does not appear in the Bible.

Rights becomes a legal term first under the Romans.

They granted certain “rights” to the Latin people who they had conquered. And right through the Middle ages and on Rights were granted to certain people by someone who had power over them. Thus a “right” to use a certain plot of grass to graze your cows...a “right” to get water from a certain well in town. And so forth. A right was always granted specifically to

this certain person for this certain purpose. Thus we still speak of a “right of way” in using transportation.

All this was based on the idea that God owned all of Creation, and gave in trust to rulers, who parceled it out to noblemen, who parceled it out to vassals who did the same to lesser vassals.

And when a Vassal got a certain parcel of land...it came with obligations...

Usually to give a portion of crops to the Lord or to fight for him in a war.

Every right came with obligations.

When I was granted the Ph.D. the President of the university said: “You are granted by this faculty the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy with all the rights, privileges and obligations pertaining thereunto. Welcome to the ancient and honorable company of Scholars.”

The ancient and honorable thing went back to the 12th century when European Universities began to appear. It was based on the medieval notion of a specific right granted by the Lord and it always came with obligations.

But what happened over the course of time was that the medieval society with its chain of personal obligations gave way to modernity. The nature of Feudal Society meant that everyone knew the person to whom they owed obligations and who granted them their “rights”.

Government grew more centralized and distant.

Rights were granted by contract. Taxation was by a distant government. The whole thing separated the Rulers from the ruled. And now the obligations often were tyrannical.

A new mentality began to appear in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. People began to see their distant government not as their government but as an alien, often oppressive machine...an agent that forced them to do things. So much so that they began to think of Freedom from oppression. They changed the meaning of “Rights”. Rights now became associated with Freedom from oppression.

And these “rights” were granted not by someone who knew you but by a distant God....in the 18th century a kind of watchmaker God who created and let things run on their own.

Listen gain to something familiar....

“....who are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights....”

Everyone is born with certain rights....and much of the Constitution is based on this premise.

And in the course of time, it has become increasingly clear that the understanding that Rights come with obligations...

Has been forgotten.

If our rights are the same for everyone...

Then to whom are answerable?

I suppose to the “Creator” who endowed them...

But God doesn’t seem to enforce the

Obligations that have always gone with rights.

And furthermore...When the Constitution was framed, the main issue was the King of England....

The framers, above all, wanted freedom  
from arbitrary obligations...

Freedom from...

Freedom **from**...

Rights can only be asserted if someone  
is trying to make you do something...

And I wonder if some people try  
very hard to find someone or  
something who is trying to make  
them do something...

Like my gentleman in the bar:  
“I’ve got a right!”

But what is the alternative?

What about the obligations?

But to who or what are we obligated?

On page 99 the Prayer Book says that in  
God’s service is perfect freedom.

And what is that service?

Much of what Jesus said and did  
was about the perfect freedom that  
goes with serving God.

The Good Samaritan who cared for his natural enemy.

The owner of the Vineyard who paid the late workers  
a full day's wage...

The Prodigal's Father who forgave his wayward,  
ungrateful son...and threw him a party!

And nowhere...nowhere..., does Jesus speak  
of our rights!

I fear this nation has lost much sense of  
being a mutually dependent body...

In our partisanship...

In our search for people who  
think as we do so we can feel  
comfortable...

So we can have a tyrant to  
assert our rights against...

We have lost our  
sense of obligation to  
every other human  
being.

Of course I don't know how to bring it back....

But I have the idea that it will have to be some form  
of Jesus' teaching...

Those "inalienable rights" we all have...

Have inalienable obligations.....

Jesus said: "In as much as you have  
done it unto one of the least of these,  
you have done it unto me."

And of course...

"Forgive your enemies..."

These are not platitudes, no matter how many times we have heard them.

In his service is perfect freedom...

And one thing is clear...

That perfect freedom...

Is forgiveness...

Forgiveness and love...

Even love of people we might despise.