

Hot Dogs, Fireworks & the Gospel

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Last weekend, Lydia and I took our family to the town that I grew up in for the Fourth of July festivities. In between the relay races, hot dogs, swimming and fireworks, I did a lot of reflecting on freedom. Having traveled and preached where the "iron curtain" has fallen, and even behind where it still stands, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the freedoms that we enjoy.

Appreciating Freedom

I may have told some of you this story in the past (but when has that ever stopped me from repeating it again?), but every Fourth of July I think of Vaclav and Renata whom we met in Prague. They have a very large family and we would always spend at least one afternoon together when our family would be in Prague. Our first outing together was to a park near their apartment. Vaclav said he wanted to take us to the top of the hill (a considerable distance) to show us something. When we reached the top, he pointed out the American flag flying in the distance at the American embassy. He told us that he would come to that spot ever since he was a boy to watch the Americans raise or lower their flag. He felt that this was the only truly free act that he had ever witnessed. Vaclav and Renata would bring their children to that spot occasionally to see the flag taken down in the evening. Their family would secretly pray on that hillside that they, too, would one day have political freedom. In time, God answered their prayer.

Finding True Freedom

Many people have said to me, "Isn't it wonderful that Russia and Eastern Europe are now converted?"

They mistakenly equate the political freedom with conversion. We must continue to pray for the conversion of Russia and other countries formerly controlled by atheistic, totalitarian regimes. The greatest value of the new political freedom in these nations is that it has set the stage for the preaching of the Gospel, a work that is still largely left undone. Pray for the freedom to preach the Gospel in the many nations that still restrict the activity of Christian nationals and foreign missionaries. Allow God to lead you in your prayer. He will use your prayer in a powerful way.

This is the reason that I find being an evangelist to be so exciting: because the preaching of the Gospel is the means by which people will be changed, both here on earth and eternally. When I preach the Gospel, I offer people the greatest hope that the world will ever know. I'm not offering them a new philosophy, religion, moral code or social order. I am offering them life:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

When someone accepts the Gospel, it brings dramatic results. God promises that they will become born again (cf. John 3:3-7), a new creation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17), a child of God (cf. John 1:12), more than a conqueror (cf. Romans 8:37), and an heir to the Kingdom of God (cf. Galatians 4:4-7). Through the preaching of the Gospel, individual people are made new. When they are made new, their households, neighborhoods and towns are renewed. Through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the world truly can be made new.

The Gospel Must be Preached

It is for these reasons that I always preach the simple message of the Gospel (kerygma). I may speak on prayer, healing, or some other topic, but I almost always end my preaching with the simple message of the Gospel and an invitation to receive Jesus as Savior. I believe this to be my calling: to

preach Jesus as the Savior and allow the power of the Holy Spirit to prove that message to be true with signs of power. When people receive the Holy Spirit, they are set free: Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3:17) had a great love for Jesus and desired to follow him.

You and I must proclaim Jesus to the world and invite them to open their hearts and receive all that God has for them. God is the one who makes the promises; He will be there for them! I remember preaching to a church full of people in Cuba one night and the Holy Spirit inspired to preach on seeking first the kingdom of God and God's provision for our material needs:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:25-33)

I was quite familiar with the passage. We chose it as the Gospel reading for our wedding twenty-six years ago. Little did we know that one day we would be doing the Lord's work full-time and be totally dependent upon His providence! Yet, as I began to preach that night, I was hesitant. I knew how poor

and hungry these people were. I knew that their diet consisted of a government ration of a roll and coffee for breakfast, and beans and rice for lunch and dinner. Most of them had not eaten any meat in more than four years. I knew most of them only ate one meal of beans and rice per day for the last week of the month in order to make their family's rations last. I knew that their milk allotment was taken away at age seven and only available to senior citizens with a doctor's prescription. I had seen the truck loads of bananas moving through the city with armed soldiers on the back. I knew that I must concentrate on what God wanted me to preach and not the human impossibility of the situation. I told the Lord silently before I began to preach, "It's a good thing that this is *your* promise and not mine, because these people *really* need a lot of help!" I preached the message and challenged the people to seek God wholeheartedly, trusting in Him for their every need.

The next morning, a woman arrived to the first class of the day in the evangelization school. She was overjoyed to the point of tears. She explained that she had long been suffering from stomach problems. The doctor would recommend her to receive milk, but being less than 65, she could not receive it even with a prescription. When she opened her door that morning to come to the evangelization school, she found a bottle of cold milk on her doorstep. She exclaimed that it is true: God will provide for your needs.

Conclusion

God is so good! He gives us so many blessings. I frequently pray not only to thank God for the freedoms and blessings that we enjoy, but I also pray that I will never take them for granted. I also thank God for you and how you have helped us go and preach the Gospel. I assure you that lives are truly being changed and people are being set free. Pray for us as we continue in this work. We will be praying for you.