

Sermon for July 2, 2017 – “State of Independence”

13th Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: Galatians 5:1, 13-25; John 8:31-36

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In anticipation of Independence Day this Tuesday I want to lift up two familiar quotes from American history. Quotes that capture one of the core ideas of our democracy. The first comes from Patrick Henry speaking at the Virginia Convention in 1775: “I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.” The second comes from The Declaration of Independence, which, of course, was adopted in Philadelphia on July 4th, 1776: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...“That they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights...“That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” When the Continental Congress declared the separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain 241 years ago, liberty was foremost in the minds of our nation’s founders. The idea didn’t originate with them, of course. In every time and place, human beings, as the inscription on the Statue of Liberty reads, have yearned to “breathe free.” Some 3,000 years before Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence the Israelites suffered under bondage in Egypt. They yearned for freedom. God sent a man named Moses who demanded of Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” When Pharaoh refused – God delivered. A thousand or so years later, the people were again oppressed, both by the tyranny of the Roman Empire and by the powers and principalities of the world. It was then, that God sent a man named Jesus. He announced in His inaugural sermon that He had been anointed by the Holy Spirit **“To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free.”** This same liberating Jesus would later say to His closest followers, as we read in this morning’s gospel reading, **“If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples...“And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...“So, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”**

Free, indeed. What we’re taking about, as you’ve no doubt guessed, is freedom. Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. In the beginning when God created people He could’ve made us puppet-like which would’ve meant that whenever God wanted us to do something He’d just pull a string and we’d do it. But, what kind of relationship would that be? God created us, women and men, with the **capacity** and, maybe more importantly, the **responsibility** to act as free moral persons. The desire for freedom isn’t simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the Living God. There are more than 50 references to freedom in the New Testament. Each of them exploring different dimensions of what Paul calls in his letter to the Romans, **“the glorious liberty of the children of God.”** In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, however, there’s a less than glorious atmosphere surrounding the subject. It seems that the church there was divided. The question was how one was saved, or as Paul put it – justified. And, what was at stake was nothing less than the church’s identity. It seems that a group of “Missionaries” (often called Judaizers) had visited Galatian, what is now Turkey. They believed, simply put, that Gentile (non-Jewish) followers of Jesus (a Jew) should take the next “logical” step and, essentially, become Jews.

They believed that the only means of salvation/justification was strict adherence to the Law of Moses. This meant for starters that men would need to be circumcised. As you might expect, Paul felt differently. For Paul, “faith in Jesus Christ” not works under the Law is the only way to be “justified.” This belief was central to the Protestant Reformation. Paul wrote that: **“...we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. “And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law...”**“Because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” The understanding here is that followers of Christ were then “free”, as it were, from having to “earn” their own salvation by works. They were to live by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, not subject to the law. But Paul also issues a warning...That being free from the Law was not an invitation to autonomy, doing whatever you wanted to do. Paul passionately exhorted the Galatians: **“Do not use your freedom for self-indulgence But through love become slaves of one another...”**“For the whole law is summed up in this single commandment **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** According to Paul, **“the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”**

Just as each generation of Americans must learn anew what our Pledge of Allegiance is all about, the belief that civil liberty is a function of fidelity to **justice**, so must each generation of Jesus’ followers learn that Christian liberty is a function of fidelity to the Law of Love. Specifically, love in the sense in which Jesus spoke of it when He commanded us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We might ask: but how can we be commanded to love? A reasonable question **if** you were speaking of love in a romantic sense. But we’re not. The love of which Jesus spoke was different. He was referring to “agape” love. He was emphasizing ethics, how one lives, over emotion. The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: “Basically, love means being responsible. “Responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the whole of humanity.” To be truly free means freedom from the prison of ego. To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self. To be truly free, one author wrote, is to move into the **risk** of love and to give oneself to the **demand** of service. To be truly free is to be free **for** responsibility not **from** it.

I mean, think of the choice Jesus made in becoming human; emptying Himself, as Paul put it, to identify completely with human beings and the human condition and to ultimately choosing the way of the Cross, **freely** choosing the way of the Cross. That’s freedom. When we baptize, we speak of participation in Jesus’ act of salvation on the Cross, it is this act that unites us as God’s people, the Body of Christ. We say that baptism “unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place.” We say that baptism is God’s gift of grace and that we’re summoned to respond to that grace. We’re to love one another. We’re to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ...” We understand that the need of the other is really our own need, the suffering of the other is, in a very real sense, our own suffering. What do we think of this? What if I said that there was a way to test this? A way to test whether or not we’re still functioning, empathetic, free moral people? Theologian Frederick Buechner came up with it and it’s quite simple. Ask yourself, he said, whether or not you’ve cried for someone other than yourself in the last year. If not, well then chances are you’re already dead.

We're challenged to consider if we have sympathy or compassion for someone other than ourselves. It strikes me that there's a sense of responsibility here. As I said earlier, Jesus' commandment to love emphasized ethics, how we live, over emotion. So, it seems to me we'll never completely pass the test until we actually **do** something for someone else; something, anything. Make a call, or a visit, bake a pie, or some cookies. Write a short note, or send a card. Lend a helping hand, a listening ear, offer a shoulder to cry on, or lean on. How did Paul put it, again? **"The only thing that matters is faith working in love."**

By the will of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit freedom **and** responsibility belong together in our personal lives and in the life of our faith communities. I believe that the same is true for our nation. One of our country's great gifts to the world is the notion of religious freedom as provided in the first amendment to the Constitution. Some of the ways that it's been interpreted recently drive me crazy; banning nativity scenes and Christmas trees, removing the Ten Commandments from public buildings and so forth. As I understand it, the amendment holds that the government cannot impose a state religion on its citizens and those citizens are free to exercise religion or not according to their own beliefs. I'm not talking about those people who hide their bigotry and prejudices behind a mask of religious liberty...Not at all. Nor am I saying that people of faith don't have a crucial role to play in the life of our nation. In fact, I'm saying just the opposite. It's not freedom **from** religion, it's freedom **for** religion. And so, I believe that we ought to be actually practicing ours. We ought to be working every day to create a society that's marked by kindness and concern for the common good. We ought to be listening for voices that aren't being heard. We ought to be speaking out against excessive self-indulgence and naming the corrosive consequences of arrogance and greed. Paul put it so plainly in this regard; he wrote **"if you bite and devour one another – take care that you are not consumed by one another."** Would that most Americans, especially its leadership, would heed this advice!

America has been called "The Great Experiment. From the time of its first settlement, America has been a place where people came to experiment with doing things differently, understanding things differently. America's story is one of constantly tackling the biggest problems ahead of everyone else with very little to guide us but our founding principles and the dreams of our founding fathers. Like them I believe that the United States has a particular calling. I believe we're called to be a servant people. A people bringing good news to the oppressed, modeling justice, proclaiming liberty to the captives. Can you think of a time that called for moral leadership more than these troubled days? Can you think of a time where there's been a greater opportunity, a greater responsibility, to others?

A responsibility to repair, to raise up, to build up, to offer hope for those who mourn in our midst and beyond our shores?

During the 2008 presidential campaign Barack Obama spoke about the United States becoming a multi-cultural, pluralistic society. He said that "Whatever we once were we are no longer a Christian nation." Whether we ever actually were is a subject for debate. But, **whatever** the founding fathers were, they were certainly principled men of strong **faith**.

They believed, as Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, that “liberty cannot be established without morality – nor morality without faith.” But, even though Christianity may no longer be fashionable, and it’s becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain our Christian identity in this day and age, there’s no reason for us to abandon our Christian principles...those principles that formed our country making it the great country that it is. Making it, as Ronald Reagan put it, a “shining city on a hill” to a “tired and disillusioned world.”

Brothers and sisters, here’s the thing. We must stay true to our beliefs, the ideals upon which this country was founded and which made this country great. But more than that, we must remember, first and foremost, that we take our name and our mission from Jesus Christ and we must maintain our trust in God completely.

Billings Learned Hand was one of our country’s most outstanding judges in the late 19th and early 20th century. He once asked: “What is the spirit of liberty?” In answer, he wrote these eloquent words: “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women. It weighs their interests alongside its own, it remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. The spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, 2,000 years ago, taught humanity a lesson it has never fully learned but has never quite forgotten...“That there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.” Brothers and sisters in Christ, may our pledge of allegiance be this day to that kind of kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That is our state of independence!

Thanks be to God – in whom we forever place our trust.

Amen and amen.