

Sermon for July 5, 2020 – “True Freedom”

14th Sunday in OT, Year A—Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-14; John 8:31-33

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This morning’s sermon is something of a sequel to last week, though it may be more accurate to say that it is a continuation. Yesterday, of course, was the 4th of July. Independence Day. Our festival of freedom. So there are two quotations that I wish to highlight this morning: The first is from Thomas Jefferson and is the second line of the Declaration of Independence, “For 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. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The second is from Jesus heard 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 make you free.”**

And so we discover two freedoms. Political freedom. Religious freedom. As I’m fond of offering context, I offer some for the first quote. The date was June 7th, 1776. A group of thirteen men were gathered together in a small room locked in debate. They represented the thirteen different colonies and there was no unanimity among them. The debate was heated. Finally, Richard Henry Lee made the motion that “...all thirteen colonies be free, independent states.” The resolution was seconded by John Adams. The debate continued. It was, by all accounts, intense. A vote was finally taken and, believe it or not, it was NOT unanimous. The vote was seven for, six against. A subcommittee was then formed headed by Jefferson. It was charged with creating a document that would declare the independence of the colonies. It was put before Congress on July 2nd, 1776 and immediately ratified by every state except New York, who held out for two more days. On July 4th, 1776, it was finally ratified unanimously. It was then that we first heard the words that became etched into American history and the hearts and minds of all Americans then and since. It began with the words from the first quote, “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” But, interestingly, it continued: “We, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions solemnly publish and declare that these united colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent States.” In other words, the authors appealed to God as the authority that gave them the right to pursue political independence. The last line of the Declaration is also quite memorable, “With firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” And they did. Everyone who signed the Declaration lost something because of it. Of the 56 people who signed it that day more than half suffered deeply because of their commitment to independence. Two were killed immediately in battle, five were soon captured and tortured by the British, twelve had their homes burned, nine others died of hardship related to the war. But we’re not only impressed with their integrity and sacrifice, we’re also impressed by their deep commitment to God and the ideals of Christianity.

Now, regarding the religious beliefs of the founding fathers, much has been written on the subject. But, whether they were Christian, “deist” as some have said or something in between. As I see it there can be no doubt that the founding of our democracy was born in the hearts and minds of religious men. John Adams, our second president, wrote the following words to his wife, Abigail, “The second of July 1776 will be the most memorial epic in the history of America. I am led to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations on every anniversary festival. It ought to be a commemoration as a day of deliverance with solemn acts of devotion to God.” Yesterday, even in a time of pandemic, we celebrated. But, I have to wonder, did we spend any time at all thanking God for our freedoms that which we so easily take for granted? that came at such high a cost? But John Adams wasn’t only founding father, who was a man of faith. A large majority of the founding fathers were.

William Penn once said that, “... if we are not ruled by God we will be ruled by tyrants.” So it’s kind of ironic that America founded, in no small part, on religious ideals has largely become a secular nation. Ironic because central to the American idea of democracy, at its very source, at its very beginning, was a deeply held religious conviction. Not that I would not be at all in favor of a theocracy, certainly not like the one in Iran and which we’ve seen throughout history. And I get it that there’s something of a fine line here, but I tend to agree with President Dwight Eisenhower who believed that democracy works best when it is built on a foundation of religious idealism. He’d once said: “Our government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith.” And it was Ike that pushed to have the phrase “under God” inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance. It was Ike that signed the bill that made “In God We Trust” our nation’s official motto.

Now, I understand the need for a separation of church and state. I get that. There’s a reason why the first amendment reads, at least in part, as follows that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” But it’s hard to ignore the psalmist who wrote, “**Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.**” (v.12)

Democracy, it’s been said, is hard. You have to want it bad because it’s going to put up a fight. The Declaration of Independence is not an easy document. Nevertheless, its words have been etched into the soul of this nation. They’ve been described as “democracy in a nutshell.” Not surprisingly, their meaning has been re-interpreted in every generation since they were first written.

It was nearly a century later that Abraham Lincoln wrote about the need for a “...rebirth of freedom in every generation.” These words echoed those immortalized in his Gettysburg address. Lincoln, as he often was, was quite correct. Every generation must apply the principles of freedom in a new way and right, wrong or indifferent that has happened. Not only that, the idea and the ideal of freedom have continue to spread in new ways in each and every generation, even beyond the bounds of the United States.

Historian Henry Steele Comminger, in a commentary on the Declaration of Independence, wrote: “These ideals of freedom are not confined to America, but they entered into the mainstream of history on every continent.” The ideal that **all** people are created equal. What a grand dream! What an amazing, spirit-filled vision our forefathers had! But we tend to think of this **kind** of freedom in a purely political sense. And as we’re all well aware the freedoms we enjoy here in the United States are **not** experienced everywhere.

And so, in the context of worship this morning we celebrate another, even greater, kind of freedom. Which brings us back to our second quote. “**If you continue in My word you are truly My disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.**” It may have occurred to you that Jesus isn’t talking about political freedom. He’s talking about **personal** freedom. **Christian** freedom. In my opinion, **true** freedom.

But what exactly are we talking about here? What does it mean to be free in Christ? Are you in prison? What if you live in a dictatorship, especially a religious one? One Christian scholar offers this definition saying that, “...to be free in Christ is to be the kind of person we’re **intended** to be.” Sounds kind of a strange doesn’t it that freedom is in being the kind of person we’re intended to be. The implication being that we’re to be what—or who—**someone else** wants us to be. Shouldn’t we be free to be the people we want to be? You’d think so. But for those who believe that, let me ask, How’s that working for you?

You see, and this is important, true freedom isn’t about doing whatever we want. And be honest, would we really want it to be? Think about it for a minute seriously! How often are we ourselves, though more likely others, victims of **our** freedom when we make bad choices? So many think of the Christian life in terms of legalism, religion as a bunch of rules to obey. But Christian freedom, much like any other freedom, comes with responsibilities.

As citizens in a democracy we must be responsible for our actions. We have freedom, and rights, absolutely! But we have responsibilities too. The same is true as citizens in God’s kingdom. We must **participate** and we must remain **committed**. There’s nothing passive about it. Believe it or not, Paul told the Thessalonians, second letter, chapter 3, verse 10 that if you don’t work you don’t eat. But you’ll notice I’ve said **nothing** about obeying laws. You might ask: “Well, what about the Ten Commandments?” My response would be, “Well, the truth is that obeying God isn’t so much about keeping commandments as it is about recognizing the boundaries they protect.” And that’s because, you see, boundaries exist for our safety and protection to allow for people have some degree of control of their lives.

As I read Scripture boundaries are fundamental to the act of creation. Boundaries were among the first things that God created, the boundaries between light and darkness, sea and sky, sea and land. As for humans, God created us to be free but to act responsibly. From the very beginning God wanted us to be in control of ourselves and to live happy lives but there were **still** boundaries. God understood that we needed them. But as we all know we misused our freedom and, as a result, lost it. The biggest part of this loss of freedom was the loss of self-control. Ever since, we’ve felt the results of that loss in a wide variety of ways that have brought humankind nothing but misery.

Boundaries are something so dear to God's heart that it was one of the motivators of Christ's sacrifice. Earlier, we read from Paul's letter to the Galatians: **"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."** Jesus died to set us free; free from sin, freedom the world around us, freedom from death. That's what boundaries are all about, freedom.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, from the cross almost 2,000 years ago Jesus cried out: **"It is accomplished."** In doing so he proclaimed our "declaration of independence." He set us free commanding us love God and neighbor. It is our responsibility, our joyful response to an incredible act of love. So let me ask you, does this sound like something to which we could pledge our lives? Our fortunes? Our sacred honor? I'd say so, but there's more! And it's the best part! What I mean is that the **ultimate** freedom is still to come. It'll happen when Christ returns. Then, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, **"The creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God."** I'd say that's something worth waiting for and definitely something worth celebrating! Until then, let us be thankful to God for our freedom as a country—one nation under God, as the Church—children of God created and called by God.

Amen and amen.