

For Freedom

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2020

Galatians 5:1, 13-26



INTRODUCTION

Independence Day is not on the liturgical calendar for lots of reasons. The most obvious reason is that it is a holiday for only one country, and there is the worldwide nature of the Christian community (not that the United States is the only country to have an independence celebration or a national day of some sort. It is a fairly universal occurrence). Because of this, in our *Book of Worship*, there are suggestions about how to mark this occasion in the worship life of the church. The text we've chosen for this standalone service comes from the suggestions in the "Other Special Days" section of the *Book of Worship*. It is good, we believe, to acknowledge, with the rest of the various nations we call home, to stand in solidarity as citizens and give thanks.

There is another reason why "Independence Day" doesn't appear in the Christian calendar. That reason is more delicate and often misunderstood. Independence isn't really a Christian concept. It could be argued that independence is antithetical to the nature of the faith. At its heart, Christianity is about acknowledging that we need help. We need a savior. We need the community of faith to walk with us in this journey through life. Some have argued over the years that even as a nation we might be better served to celebrate "Interdependence Day" and recognize that the greatness of our country is found in the economic and social systems that rely on individuals and groups to work in concert with one another to achieve shared results, ones that honor everyone, not just the few.

The misunderstanding here is that some believe we are claiming, or attempting to claim, that if you are a Christian you cannot be a patriot, or you cannot be proud

of the country in which you live. It is true that there are elements of our society toward which followers of Jesus Christ ought to stand in opposition. Rugged individualism is one of those elements. Let's admit, rugged individualism makes for a great action movie, but the idea that anyone stands alone is simply antithetical to our faith and our witness.

So, how do we observe Independence Day in worship? With thanksgiving. It is always appropriate to give God thanks for the blessings we too often take for granted. It is appropriate to acknowledge the bounty that surrounds us as a nation — not with an arrogant acceptance of resources as somehow earned or deserved, but with humility that recognizes our unworthiness, except that Christ makes us worthy.

Next should follow a time of confession where we acknowledge that we have not always dealt with this abundance of resources in the most equitable manner and that our striving for more has left many in our own nation and around the world suffering from want and hunger. This is not America-bashing, but prophetic truth-telling with honesty and a desire for change. More than just desire, it is a belief that change is possible and shows willingness to be a part of the change that brings hope to the world.

Worship should include such a call to justice, even as we pray for leaders across the nation. Whether we agree politically with those elected to serve or not, we offer them prayers of support and wisdom, along with the hope that they might be better instruments of the Spirit that will lead them to build the nation that we dream it could be — the light on the hill that we aspire to be, not because we are inherently better than other nations, but because we know the source of the light that draws us all.

We sing songs of celebration and thanksgiving. We include not just songs of our own nation, such as "America the Beautiful," but songs of the world community, such as "This is My Song." We celebrate who we are and can be, and we acknowledge that there are others who give hope to the world as well. We should, even on this day, "outdo one another in giving honor."

What about color, what about the Pledge of Allegiance? In most cases, there will be members of the congregation who will bring the "red, white, and blue" of the nation into the worship space. It would be better that the worship team use the

colors of the liturgical season to adorn the altar. The green of ordinary time would be an appropriate backdrop for this day. As for the pledge, it would better to reserve that for more civic occasions, such as town council meetings, PTA meetings, scouting events, or even public school classrooms. But the sanctuary is a place where we pledge allegiance to God and God alone. The pledge first appeared in 1892. It was written by Francis Bellamy, a socialist minister. It was changed in 1923 and then changed again in 1954, when in the face of what was felt to be a Communist threat, President Eisenhower asked Congress to add the words “under God” to the pledge (<https://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>). But the history of the people of God is even older; and Jesus clearly asked us not to put any allegiance, even that of parents, above that of God. That is why it is best to leave the reciting of the pledge to more civic occasions. While an Independence Day observance has a place in the worship of the people of God, it is important to avoid reducing the faith to one of nationalistic religion. Our focus must always be on lifting up the name of Jesus as we continue to be in the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

PREACHING NOTES

Freedom **is** a Christian concept. If you read through the introduction page for this service, you saw the declaration that “independence” isn’t really a Christian concept. It might even be considered antithetical to the faith. Our faith tells us about our need first for a Savior and then for one another who will become companions on our journey of faith, to be made into disciples of Jesus Christ.

But freedom is something we can claim and something we can proclaim. Paul launches the fifth chapter of the letter to the Galatians with the word freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free.” For freedom. What does that mean exactly? For Paul, freedom is not simply a gift we are given, but a responsibility placed in our hands.

The question isn’t really “Are you free?” or “How free are you?” For Paul, the question is, “What are you going to do with your freedom?” There is a choice to be made. What will you choose? Here again, Paul talks about what his understanding of what a gift that comes from the Spirit, or from Christ, really is and what it isn’t. First of all, a true gift of the Spirit isn’t for you. It isn’t about

making the recipient better or more whole or more holy. A gift is given to build up the community of faith. That's the test of the spiritual gift: Is the whole body of Christ enhanced by this gift? If it makes the receiver somehow better but doesn't affect anyone else, then it isn't really from God. God's gifts are meant to be shared. They are meant to be used for others.

The gift of freedom is to be used in service to others. Paul even goes further; we are to become slaves to one another. That seems like the opposite of freedom. And this grows out of the law, which Paul sums up as, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14). Of course, he understands that is only half of the law, but it is the half he is dealing with now. How do we live in human relationships or in community with one another?

The ongoing battle we fight is not the war for independence, but the battle against self. We are certainly behind enemy lines in the culture in which we live, a culture of self. Day after day, we are told to think first about ourselves, but the Spirit invites us to think first of who and how we can serve. Paul describes this battle as one between flesh and spirit. But he doesn't mean that we should mortify the flesh, that any attempt to find pleasure or satisfaction in our bodies or in the world in which we live is a negative thing. This sort of interpretation of this battle between flesh and spirit is what led to the idea that Christians can't have any fun, that there is no joy in our faith, that it is all about the drudgery of service that feels like slavery.

On the contrary, Paul claims that it is the self-centered life that leads to drudgery, isolation, and brokenness. Compare the lists that are presented here in our text: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (5:19-21). That's quite a list. Take a second look and you will see the inevitable selfishness behind these words. They are about pleasing the self at the expense of others. (As an aside, that word "sorcery" comes from a Greek word that also gives us words like pharmacy or pharmaceutical. It's about potions and substances that are supposed to give wisdom and inner vision. If you want a text about mind-altering substances, here it is.)

All of those words divide, or they take, or they abuse. This is what Paul means about pleasures of the flesh. Those actions and behaviors and attitudes that push

people away separate self from others. They are words of individualism. "It's all about me." In contrast, the second list is about joining together, about relationships and about building up the other. Words like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23) are about interdependence and caring, building up the community of faith and the wider world. This way of living is full of joy, full of pleasures of all sorts. But they are pleasures shared; they are joys experienced in community.

At the end of the second list of attributes, Paul writes "there is no law against such things." Supposedly, Augustine said in order to sum up the law, "Love God and do as you please." That seems a risky premise, that "do as you please" thing, except that the proviso to first "love God" means that what pleases you is what pleases God; therefore, there is no need of a law since your every motivation is to please the one you love. Paul's argument is if you love yourself most, then you will do what pleases you, regardless of how it affects everyone else. But if you love God most, then you will do what pleases God, which includes loving neighbor.

This is the freedom Paul celebrates in this text. And, it could be the freedom we celebrate as we commemorate Independence Day. It is the freedom to care for others, the freedom to see all people as equals in the sight of law and the eyes of God. It is the freedom to serve not because you have to but because you get to; not because you have a duty to fulfill, but because you have a love to put into action. We are free not to live independent of one another, caring only for ourselves, but we are free to acknowledge our interdependence and how our own personal good comes to us from many others, even as we contribute to the good of others.