

July 6, 2011

“Independence Day: Christian Freedom”
(Psalm 33:8-22; Galatians 5:13-25)

Last Monday, July 4th, we celebrated the 235th birthday of our nation, The United States of America. Most offices were closed as was our church, and people had a three day holiday weekend.

People celebrated Independence Day in a variety of ways. Many have become traditions. Some people traveled to see loved ones and others just stayed at home with the family. There were fireworks. With the tinder dry brush conditions, and despite warnings of the high fire danger numerous wild fires took place, most of them associated with neighborhood firework displays. There were the traditional barbeques and picnics, and some patriotic observances in recognition of what the Day stands for.

We celebrate this holiday because of what happened in 1776.

On July 4, 1776, there was signed in the City of Philadelphia one of America's historic documents: The Declaration of Independence. It marked the birth of this nation which, under God, was destined for world leadership.

We often forget, in declaring independence from an earthly power, our forefathers made a forthright declaration of dependence upon Almighty God. The closing words of this

July 6, 2011

document solemnly declare: “With firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The fifty-six courageous men who signed this document understood that this was not just high sounding rhetoric. They knew that if they succeeded, the best they could expect would be years of hardship in a struggling new nation. If they lost, they would face a hang man’s noose.

We celebrate that these people had the wherewithal and courage to break the existing hold of Europe on these wilderness colonies.

It is important to remember certain facts about the men who made this pledge; they were not poor men by any stretch of the imagination. Most of them enjoyed much ease and luxury in their personal lives. They were wealthy landowners, respected men in their communities. Among the signers was a Presbyterian minister, John Witherspoon.

But they considered liberty much more important than the security they enjoyed, and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. They fulfilled their pledge. They paid the price. And freedom was won. It has been said, “To be born free is a privilege. To die free is an awesome responsibility.”

Freedom is never free. It is always purchased at a great cost. On the signing of The Declaration of Independence,

July 6, 2011

John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, “I am well aware of the toil, and blood, and treasure, that it will cost to maintain this declaration, and support and defend these states; yet, through all the gloom I can see the rays of light and glory. I can see that the end is worth more than all the means.”

We celebrate the actions of people we only know about because of books. We celebrate the actions of people who lived without the things we take for granted in our everyday living.

What did they want to become independent from? If you read through the document you find oppression, abuse, removal of rights, false justice and punishment. You find a precisely stated set of charges against the king and their justification for independence. Their declaration was to break free of the strangling hold of a tyrant.

Interestingly we celebrate the day of declaration not the day it was actually achieved. I guess if they had actually lost the struggle we would not have celebrated at all last Monday. We celebrate the ideal of the prize that was worth so much time, energy and lives.

So what is the Christian comparison?

The scripture we heard this morning is talking about freedom. This passage is about Mosaic Law, something that helped to identify sin and how to live a life honorable to God. However, too many people, religious leaders, used

July 6, 2011

the Law as a tool of control. They used it for power and position and separation.

Paul declares freedom from the Law. He tells the churches in Galatia that they are called by God through Jesus to be free.

The people of Paul's day suffered persecution and hardship which increased as they become Christians. The community made it tough to live this new found faith. It was hard to celebrate the freedom that Paul encourages.

They had already broken from their old tradition. They were trying to figure out the ins and outs of this new faith. They had lots of questions and pressures to give in to and it appears in Scripture that one of the most logical was becoming a Jew to become a Christian. The pressure was to live under the Law as a first requirement. Paul argued that it was not so.

Hindsight is so good. Today we can look at United States history and find the investment made by these signers so long ago was worth it. It is great to be free. It is fantastic that I can pretty much do what I want and say what I want. The structure of the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence would give an English teacher apoplexy. The second sentence is straight forward and says: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable (unchangeable) rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Two hundred thirty

July 6, 2011

five years later we still enjoy the freedom that the Declaration of Independence created for us: “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

This is my kind of place. I am so happy that God placed me here – in the United States of America, in Los Angeles, in your company here at Immanuel. There are a lot of less comfortable places in the world where there is little or no freedom. Places where the liberty and pursuit of happiness are a pipe dream. The sun does not set on any part of this planet where the biggest goal is to have life and there is little hope for much else.

Great as it is to live here in the United States, we are not without our problems, or should I say challenges to freedom and the pursuit of happiness: traffic laws, traffic lights, speed limits, home mortgages, income taxes, building codes, unemployment, medical costs, long lines at the checkout counter, need for money...the list could go on and on. It seems to me that with freedom, a lot of other things come which steal away our freedom.

The freedom we receive is cooperative, not exclusive. It is a union of people to protect God given rights at a cost that is shared by the group. The freedom we enjoy was not obtainable by one or two. In the revolutionary war they fought to make something new.

The freedom we receive has limits that keep us from expressing our freedom at the expense of another. But let us look at this from a Christian perspective. We live in the

July 6, 2011

greatest country in the world, the richest, the finest, and the seemingly blessed.

In our reading, Paul tells the churches in Galatia that they are meant to be free. Free from slavery to sin – free from the obligation to keep the Law which is impossible to keep. However, Paul explains that with freedom there are still rules and limits.

He states Rule 1 like this: “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (vs. 13).

We cannot use our freedom to become immoral people!
We cannot use our freedom to abuse or use other people!
We cannot use our freedom to avoid obligations with the church!
We cannot use our freedom to sit around and do nothing!

Our freedom is not a license to sin in any way. Paul adds, “We are to serve one another in love” (vs. 13).

Sounds like a limited version of freedom with all sorts of restrictions, kind of like the fine print that comes with the no interest credit card from B of A. But it really isn't too expensive. After all, the people at church are family by birth or holy adoption. Remember Paul is writing to the churches in Galatia. We all do things we don't necessarily like for family, at least occasionally.

July 6, 2011

Paul states Rule 2 like this: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (vs. 14). Here’s that “Love your neighbor” thing again. It starts in Leviticus (19:18), then Jesus is quoted in Matthew, Mark and Luke, then Paul (Gal. 5:14) and James (2:8) both remind us. Sort of a pain, isn’t it, to be reminded about loving your neighbor, over and over and over again?

Perhaps, we need to take the reminders as extra significance or importance. Here Paul reminds us that this one rule replaces the entire Law. This one rule, if followed, will set your life on an even footing in the right direction. This one rule will set you free of all the little nuances and petty restrictions of the Law.

Loving your neighbor as self, what does that really mean? How do we demonstrate our love for ourselves?

When we are hungry, thirsty or sick, we do something about it. When I decide to go someplace, I get in my car, something I bought to meet my needs. I guess there are a lot of things I do for myself... some are needs, some are comforts or fun. But I am worth all of it...right?

According to Paul, our neighbors are worth something as well. With freedom comes obligations to our family, community, neighbors and even individuals along our path. Folks that don’t value you or me at all, should still be important to us because of our freedom.

July 6, 2011

Paul is writing to people who are in the middle of a battle over salvation. They do not have the advantage of hind sight. They are fighting their way toward the path of righteousness and are uncertain of the proper steps. Some of their issues are raised within the Church itself. There must have been some real knock-down conversations and accusations between fellow believers, as they struggle with the freedom that Paul reminds them of.

The main struggle is to try to live under the oppression of the Law in hopes that it would get better or to choose the freedom that God offered through Jesus Christ.

Our forefathers in this nation recognized that their lives were on the edge of slavery to the king. No rights or self government and more and more loss of control over lives led them to declare freedom against the all powerful King of England.

They did not declare war on the king. They just severed their servitude to a life as servants to an unjust king. They changed their direction, choosing the harder path of independence. A path of struggle and pain that would end in freedom like few in the colonies had ever known.

Paul tells his readers that for Christians that path is directed by the Spirit. The battle he describes is between the sinful nature of every person and the guidance offered by the Holy Spirit. He explains that the struggle is an individual battle within each person. The choice is being bound and

July 6, 2011

controlled by a sinful nature or following the Spirit toward ultimate freedom.

The struggle for independence is still going on today. In our nation the battle over religious freedom is growing and I would suggest that if we don't join the battle, we will continue to see our rights and freedoms trimmed and removed. Our nation's founders obviously were much more open to the leading of God than many of our politicians and judges today who are trying to lead us to their form of a theocracy to the exclusion or limitation of other religious beliefs.

The battle over our individual spiritual freedom continues as well. We struggle over right and wrong everyday. We decide over loving ourselves and loving our neighbor and we probably don't do as good a job as we could or should. God offers us the help we need, though it's not as easy to find as we want. It takes real effort and control to listen to the Spirit. It takes an even greater effort to follow its direction.

All Glory be to God! Amen.

References: Adapted "Independence Day," T. Bowen; "St. Paul's Epistle to the Churches of Galatia," H. N. Ridderbos; "Galatians," John Dow, The Abingdon Bible Commentary; 063010..