

The Fourth of July: Holy Trinity Church: July 3, 2022:

Galatians 5: 1, 13-15, Proper 9: The 4th of July

This July 4th let's celebrate Freedom and Civility.

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham, +

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

My dear sisters and Brothers in Christ, The United States of America will be 246 years old on July 4. That's a long time for a nation to remain free. But, when you look at our history in the context of world history, America is just a CHILD among the nations. Egypt, China, Japan, Rome, Greece all make America's history seem so short. Consider what a brief time we've really been here as a nation: When Thomas Jefferson died, Abraham Lincoln was a young man of 17. When Lincoln was assassinated, Woodrow Wilson was a boy of 8. By the time Woodrow Wilson died Ronald Reagan was a boy of 12.

There you have it. The lives of four men can take you all the way back to the beginning of our country, 246 years ago. We are so young. And yet we stand

tall among these nations because of the principles on which we were established: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Thus, begins the Declaration of Independence, which we celebrate today and throughout the weekend and the 4th on Monday. And do not let anyone fool you. Freedom ought and need to be celebrated. So many churches and priests and ministers today loathe patriotism in the pulpit. Many won't even bring our flags into the church. I am not one of those. I celebrate today with you the freedoms which God has blessed this great; nations of ours. Now, I cannot tell you whether God has blessed us with liberty and therefore we are free, or we have wisely and simply built our liberty based on biblical principles and thus we are free. In any case our freedom is from Almighty God.

Now let me temper our celebrations with a caution: With freedom comes great responsibility. We are not free to live excessive lives. We are not set at liberty to pursue selfish ends. Our independence should not make us infidels. In Galatians chapter 5, St. Paul so eloquently puts it for all of us, Americans: *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;*

only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. "You, my brothers and sisters, we are called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature."

What is true for the church is true for the nation: Liberty demands civility. Freedom requires righteous behavior. This July 4th let's celebrate Freedom and Civility. Celebrate formal politeness, courtesy, and good behavior in your speech.

First, let's celebrate liberty. The Apostle Paul was a champion of liberty. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire starting churches. The Galatian church is no exception. In fact, it might be the most important for it is there in the middle of the Empire that his message of Christian freedom was vigorously opposed.

Here is what happened: During St. Paul's missionary journeys he founded several churches in Asia Minor. What is today the country of Turkey. These converts to Christianity, some of them Jews living in that area and other Gentiles, accepted the Gospel as St. Paul preached it. The essence of Paul's

message to them can be found in Galatians 2:16. Here is what it says: *"Man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."* A straight forward message of salvation by grace through faith.

There were some Christian Jews who believed that Paul went too far, and they came in behind Paul and told these new converts that while Paul was right in what he said, he was only half right. They would have to observe certain ceremonial practices of the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law which, they claimed, were still binding upon the new church, especially the act of circumcision and eating food sacrificed to idols. Paul's response to these men, which we shall call Judaizers, is the book of Galatians.

Paul's terse warnings to his followers has resounded throughout the years: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised under the Jewish Law, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Paul is not kidding. Paul is very serious about freedom.

The framers of our great nation were just as serious about their political and religious freedom. In fact, they made little distinction between them. That is why the Declaration of Independence says that liberty is a right endowed not by nature but by God himself. We have been serious about liberty ever since. Patrick Henry said, "I know not what course others may take, but as for me,

give me liberty or give me death." Thomas Jefferson with a bit of humor and absolute seriousness said, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." And it need not be pointed out that that the First Amendment to the Constitution is congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.

We are serious about freedom. Why? Because we are called to be free. Those are Paul's words and they are deeply Theological, but they are the bedrock on which our country is founded. God gives humans freedom. We are made in his image free to live and think and act and in Christ God gives us freedom from the Mosaic Law, the grace to be at liberty from our sins.

Now let us be sober for a minute. There always has been and always will be those who are opposed to freedom. Paul faced it in the actions of the Judaizers. Luther faced it in the Diet at Worms. Lincoln fought it on the battlefields of Gettysburg. Martin Luther King encountered it in the streets of Memphis. And John F. Kennedy in his Inaugural Address warned the enemies of liberty: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we will pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of Liberty."

On no greater stage is this now being played out than on the streets of Baghdad and the mountains of Afghanistan. The people of these two countries are being handed a wonderful gift: A chance at democratic sovereignty. You and I will never know whether the blood and treasure we have spilled in that eastern desert will have been worth it. For, I maintain that it will take 100 years to really see the fruits of this effort. I pray that the calmer heads will prevail in the end and democracy wins. If it does then we have witnessed a world revolution.

But it never ceases to amaze me why people prefer tyranny and dictatorships, such as Hitler, in Germany, Mussolini, in Italy, Stalin, in Russia, Tojo in Japan, Mao Se Tung in China, Putin of Russia today and the control over democracy and freedom.

I believe it's because there are three kinds of people in this world. The first two are related: there are those who have a need to control and then are those who have the need to be controlled. Then there is the third kind. He/She is the person who is free and insist that others are likewise.

So, my sisters and brothers in Christ, let's celebrate our liberty, but let us not forget to celebrate also our responsibility to civility. In preparation of this sermon, I chose these two words liberty and civility for this evening/morning

because they recall the old days of our nation. I could have just as simply used the synonyms Freedom and Responsibility, but I want to draw your attention to our foundation. Our freedoms bare a heavy burden. Great thinkers recognize this. See if you know who said the following:

"The choice before us is plain: Christ or chaos, conviction or compromise, discipline or disintegration. I am rather tired of hearing about our rights and privileges as American citizens. The time is come - it is now - when we ought to hear about the duties and responsibilities of our citizenship. America's future depends upon her accepting and demonstrating God's government."-

Peter Marshall

"Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought." Pope John

Paul II

"Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." John Adams

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Edmund Burke

Finally, let's quote St. Paul, our founder of the church. The Apostle understood the inseparable link between liberty and civility. After warning the Galatians not to go back to circumcision and the Law of Moses he then answers his critics who were charging him with teaching the Gentiles to indulge themselves in whatever behavior they liked. Look at chapter 5 verse 13: "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." Use your freedom to serve. In other words: Freedom ought to be used to pursue good.

After Paul's long defense of freedom in Christ he launches into the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The message here is clear. Liberty and civility are two parts of a whole. Alexander Fraser Tytler lived at the end of the eighteenth century, but his book *The Decline and Fall of the Athenian Republic* sends a chilling warning people today. Tytler found that ancient democracies waned under the selfishness of human hearts. He wrote: "The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been 200 years. These nations have progressed through the following sequence":

From bondage to spiritual faith;

from spiritual faith to great courage;

from courage to liberty;

From liberty to abundance;

from abundance to selfishness;

from selfishness to complacency;

from complacency to apathy;

from apathy to dependency;

from dependency back to bondage.

Here is the challenge, you and I know, as well as, that our nation has lost, in the last 20 years, a great deal of its gentleness, it's kindness, it's civility.

Children are increasingly belligerent and adults coarser than before. Holy Trinity Episcopal Church let's break the cycle. Don't let the abundance we have acquired through liberty make us selfish. Celebrate with me today and throughout this 4th of July not just our liberties but our heritage of civility.

- **“I do not believe God has not given up on us. God can still do great things for you, in you, and through you. God is ready and waiting and able. So, what about you?**
- **“May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right.**

- **In the name of Jesus Christ, who was never in a hurry, we pray, O God, that You will slow us down, for we know that we live way too fast. With all of eternity before us, make us take time to live time to get acquainted with you, time to enjoy your blessings, and time to know each other.**

Finally, I believe small deeds done are better than great deeds planned. Amen.