

“Called to Freedom”

Luke 6:27-28, 31-36

Galatians 5:13-15

1 Peter 3:8-16a

As we head into Independence Day, I thought it might be interesting to look at what the Bible teaches us about freedom, how it influenced the founding fathers, and what that means for us now. July 4th was the day that the delegates met for the Second Continental Congress and adopted the Declaration of Independence. They came together to fight back against the British because they believed that they were subject to tyranny.

This cause for freedom, for liberty, sprang both from the powerful impact of the Great Awakening – the religious revival that swept the nation – and from rationalism – a movement that lifted up reason as the path to truth, the strength of the mind over the privilege of wealth and class. Distaste for taxation and stricter policies from the British was widespread in the colonies and so the people came together to fight as one – for the freedom to be a new kind of nation.

As we look back at the heroes of our history, it can be easy to romanticize things – to make the course of events seem easy or inevitable. But though they felt called to freedom, things were by no means certain. Of the 2.5 million people living in the colonies during the revolution, up to around 500,000 supported the British in the war. (For all you math people, that’s 20% of the colonists!) And even among the patriots, many of them had more that was different from one another than they had in common. They were rich and poor, men and women, country folk and city folk, farmers and merchants, white and black. There were 9,000 free blacks who fought with the Patriots, about 100 Jews, and a handful of Muslims who have been recorded in lists of revolutionary soldiers. And even among Christians there was rarely easy agreement. Back then, it was a lot more common to believe that people who were not the same denomination as you

were doomed to hell. And yet, the Declaration was adopted and signed by Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Unitarians, Deists, and one Catholic. Even today it's hard to imagine what that group would perfectly agree on...

I'll stop with the details. I'm going a long way to make a short point: the people who fought for our freedom rose above just about every division imaginable in their day to do what they thought was right. In different ways, with different roles and focuses, they came together despite class, wealth, gender, race, religion, place of origin, and on and on.

Freedom means that all of us have the right to make our own choices: to worship, to speak, to live, to pursue happiness as we see fit. In Galatians, we find Paul talking about freedom, but he's talking very specifically about freedom in Christ. Paul says that freedom in Christ means salvation comes by grace through faith in Christ. That means that you don't have to worry about whose interpretations of the laws you follow – loose or strict – as long as your choices don't interfere with salvation, he taught that you could do (or not do) anything you want.

And that's the key, right? As Christians living in freedom, we know that we are sinners, but we also know that doesn't give us permission to go set fire to a library or taunt school children just 'cause we feel like it. In Galatians, Paul tells us, "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." Now, isn't that something else? The Bible says that freedom isn't for freedom for its own sake. And right after Paul says we are called to freedom, he says – you're free so go be slaves to one another through love. The irony there is not accidental. This word for freedom is the same word used for a slave liberated from slavery. And here he goes, telling us to be slaves through *agape* – slaves through the love that G-d loves us with, the love that we show when we try to live by G-d's will for humanity.

When I think about the founding fathers and everything they rose above to form common cause, I wonder in silence. For them, the enemy was tyranny, the enemy was any who would take away the rights of another (thankfully, our sense of who is worthy of human rights has improved since then). Still, we built on their ideals and courage to become a society united in these freedoms. Jesus told us to love our enemies – he knew that we’d always manage to find enemies for ourselves. And I think of America now as I ponder the question: “Who is our enemy?”

Most of us could point to a few countries on the map who mean us harm or international terrorist groups with foul, inhuman plots. And, well, if you define an enemy as someone who is openly hostile, acting from a deep-seated hatred, then I’d say those are certainly enemies. But if we watch the news, hear the pundits, scan our Facebook feeds, overhear strangers in coffee shops, it seems like we spend more and more of our energy making enemies of our fellow Americans. We don’t seem to talk to each other much any more – we talk at each other or, worse, we only talk to our “side.” We form political camps, camps of Christian versus Christian, age-based camps, gender-based, sports -based – it seems like any possible difference we have any more, we’re drawing thicker lines and more menacing boundaries. Any who disagree or even appear to be on the other side are quickly barraged with insults, anger, impatience. Their motives and intelligence are immediately suspect and we mock and sneer as we shut down conversation so often; too often.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” Have we come to that as a nation, as people of faith? Are we so deeply washed in the values of our own side (whatever it is) that we cannot believe that a stranger has values, too? Are we so proud that we claim that we could never make a

mistake or learn from another? Is it so easy to act mean-spirited that we don't care who we hurt anymore?

Paul's voice rings out, echoing Jesus, echoing Leviticus: "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." If we have to attack anyone with a different idea from our own, we won't have to worry about our foreign enemies – we'll destroy each other ourselves. If the founding fathers spoke to each other like we do and treated each other like we do, we might still be subjects of the British Empire!

Friends, as Christians, we are called to spend each day of our lives trying to be more like Jesus. And Jesus did not bite and devour those who moved against him. When he reached out for hearts to guide and to heal, he crossed all the barriers and divisions of his day. To those who stood against him, he offered prayer, forgiveness, forbearance, and patient love. The heart of our lives, our holy savior bids us see that he stands more powerful than any division we imagine or create on earth. If we wish to give ourselves to him, we must hear his call to celebrate his holy name over all other voices that would lead us to quarrel with and despise our neighbor.

In Christ, we are free – this is our great responsibility. Giving thanks for that freedom, we can act in ways that glorify G-d, that love our neighbors, that feed the soul. Where we sin, we can engage in the freedom to be made anew when we repent and confess our sins. It is because we are truly free that scripture so often appeals to the goodness in us – to get up, to keep trying, to seek the good, to do good once more. Peter tells us, "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but...repay with a blessing."

And so, let us choose to use our freedom for unity, for love, for tender hearts, and humble minds. Let us speak words of kindness and blessing to all we meet in person or online. As people of faith, we know what G-d has done for us in Christ Jesus. We know what promise, what grace, what life lies before us. So, may we learn from Jesus and Paul and Peter and speak of the hope that rests in our hearts, with gentleness and with reverence. Amen.