

Sermon – 4th Pentecost
Romans 7:14-25a & Matthew 11:25-30
July 5, 2020

“Ours may be the only country in the world where people pay \$500,000 for a house and then leave it every other weekend in the summer to sleep in a tent”. Gotta love America!

The United States of America is 244 years old now. That seems like a long time, especially for folks like me who remember as though it were yesterday the summer of 1976 and the daily “bicentennial moments” that aired on TV every day after the evening news. When you look at our history in the context of world history, America is quite young. Egypt, China, Persia, England and Greece all make America's history seem like a mere blink of an eye in comparison. Here's another angle - when Thomas Jefferson, the writer of our nation's Declaration of Independence died, Abraham Lincoln was a teenager. When Lincoln was assassinated, Theodore Roosevelt was a boy of 7. The year he died Ronald Reagan turned 8. When Reagan became president, Barack Obama had just earned the right to vote by turning 18.

The lives of five presidents can take you all the way back to the beginning of our country, now entering the start of our 245th year. We are young. And yet among the nations our principles, at least those to which we aspired in 1776, were not only old – Jefferson asserted that they were timeless. *“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”*. Jefferson took many of his ideas of modern government from an English philosopher named John Locke, whose own political philosophy was influenced by the Greek ideals of the democratic city/state. Our country is as history goes relatively young – yet it's ideals are ancient.

The Declaration of Independence was more than a statement of political intent – it had the audacity to declare that God intends all peoples of the world to be enjoy government that respects all human life, guarantees liberty, understood as the permission and encouragement to express individual ideas including religious ones, and strives to preserve the attractive, if at times dangerous commitment to giving sinners the means to pursue what makes them happy. We celebrate these even as we concede, or mourn, the extent to which a nation can and has confused these freedoms with rootless liberty – with the “taking of liberties” that don't properly belong in mutually responsible society.

We are, or at least at one time were schooled that with freedom comes responsibility. The benefits of liberty are of necessity mitigated by the demands of liberty – which couched in religious terms, more or less means that if you give a sinner freedom, you’ve also got to subject him or her to a series of checks and balances – which in turn means living peaceably with other sinners whose ideas and desires not only will differ, but might actually offend. But we are not free to live excessive, unrestrained lives. We as Christians should know that more than anyone. We are not “at liberty” to pursue happiness- harmfully or selfishly. As a writer on freedom named Paul the Apostle so eloquently put it: "*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.*" (Galatians 5:13)

Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, particularly chapter 7 from which we read today, if only it were possible, should be read in every civics class in America. Paul is clearly writing to the individual in this lesson, but if we were to take the liberty to apply it to a country it clearly warns that even a nation of laws can succumb to the law of sin inside each of us, which so often masquerades as liberty. "*For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.*"

Paul knows nothing of a “free will” if Romans 7 is our reference. But this freedom from the law of “sin” means being captured by the law of Christ. That is what we Christians can offer – and must, to a nation that through its amazing history nevertheless has not and still does not do the good it declared it wants. We must teach it by our own selves that God the Creator has in Christ the Savior endowed us with the ability to protect all life, endeavor to listen to all people, especially those we disagree with, and pursue what makes for true happiness – obedience to Christ. If we no longer think our nation and our fellow citizens has an ear for such ideals, then we all might as well stop reading the Bible as well as the Declaration of Independence – and go to the beach on Sunday mornings as well as holidays.

In our lesson from Matthew, Jesus speaks some of the most comforting words a Christian can hear – “*come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.*” But then he goes on to say; “*take my yoke upon you and learn from me.*” That is what Paul is talking about when he talks about being “*a slave to God’s law*” – he means being “yoked” – fastened to Jesus. But Jesus does not impose a burden like governments do – indeed must. Jesus elicits goodness from us by first pouring his goodness into us. Governments, because they have to, extract, for the common good, that which are primarily personal possessions. Jesus takes nothing from us that he does not first provide.

In Matthew 10:8, Jesus describes what the task of his followers will be – and it’s an ambitious one. He commissioned them with the words “heal”, “raise”, “cleanse”, and “drive out”, adding “freely you have received, freely give.” It’s hard to imagine this passage any other way than to say in Christ, you’ve been *healed* through the forgiveness of your sins, in Christ such grace will *raise* you from your grave, in Christ, you have, as we confess when we prepare for worship each week, one who will “*cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.*” God asks of us much as citizens of his Kingdom, but nothing he has not already given – freely.

What is true for the Christian and the church is true for the nation; freedom requires righteous behavior – if it doesn’t arise from that then, as Paul says in Romans 7, it’s not real freedom – in fact it’s the opposite - bondage. French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting America in 1831, said in his great work "*Democracy in America*, "*I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public-school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!*"

On this freedom anniversary of our nation, let your thoughts be directed not just on the common idea of freedom – the sort that says “*leave me alone*”, but on Jesus’ idea of freedom – that says “*let my happiness be tied up with that of my neighbor*” – and in so doing, find our greatness as a people the way Jesus found his. AMEN