



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Called To Freedom”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-14

July 5, 2009

The mere mention of the Fourth of July evokes colorful images: Fireworks, backyard barbecues, baseball, and the stars and stripes waving overhead.

Reflecting on the numerous ways that Americans celebrate this holiday, Peter Gomes notes the popularity of combining the 1812 Overture with fireworks displays. Personally, I love to hear the overture with its booming canon blasts as fireworks light up the sky. But I confess that Gomes is right when he points out that it is pretty ironic that we would celebrate our independence from Great Britain by playing a Russian overture commemorating an 1812 victory over the French, who were our chief allies against the British. He is right to conclude that when we celebrate the Fourth of July, Americans simply want a lot of noise and it doesn't matter who produces it.

Of course, there is a great deal more behind our celebration of Independence Day. Perhaps you recall the passionate words of Patrick Henry, spoken 200 miles south in a church in Richmond: “I know not what course others may take but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.”

Or maybe you focus on the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence adopted 30 miles up the road in Philadelphia: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Powerful words that pulsate through the veins of all Americans who cherish their freedom.

When we observe the 4th of July, we celebrate more than simply the day from the eighteenth century when the founders of our nation signed the Declaration of Independence. We also recall from the 19th century, the emancipation of slaves following the Civil War; and from the middle of the 20th century, how our soldiers fought to keep the world free for democracy.

On this weekend when our nation focuses the spotlight on freedom – how it made this nation great and how it made us a beacon of hope for the world – it is essential for people of faith to remember that the idea of freedom is much older than our nation. In fact, it may be that planted within every human being, is a yearning for freedom. In the same way that we have restlessness within us until we find God, and in the same way that we instinctively recoil in the face of injustice, every person may be born with an innate desire for freedom.

Most biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew people's initial awareness of God was when they were liberated from slavery. For more than 400 years, they were held captive in

Egypt where they labored under rigid and sometimes cruel masters. But through the leadership of Moses, God led the people out of their bondage and into their own land where they could be free. Free not only to determine their destiny, but free to worship God. This is so basic to Judaism, that the first of the Ten Commandments says: “I am the Lord your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*; you shall have no other gods before me.” At the core of Judaism is the belief that God is a liberating God who wants us to be free.

When Jesus launched his ministry, he declared that the words of the prophet Isaiah defined his mission. He announced that God had sent him “to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.” (Luke 4:18)

Then, following his death and resurrection, the Apostle Paul declared that Christ has set us free. However, the freedom to which Paul refers is a special kind of freedom. It is not, as some in our culture believe, the freedom to do whatever you please. Instead, as we heard from his letter to the Galatians, “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” (Galatians 5:13) Christian freedom is not the freedom of a Bernard Madoff to get as much as you can for yourself, regardless of the impact on your investors. It’s not the freedom of a Mark Sanford to set out for the Appalachian Trail and end up in Argentina. Rather, Christian freedom liberates us from self-indulgence so that we can do something much more satisfying: “love others as ourselves.”

We are blessed to live in a nation that values religious freedom. It allows us to serve and to support our country while still giving ultimate allegiance to God. Further, it affords us the opportunity to influence the policies of our government according to our religious principles.

When the representatives to the Continental Congress met to hammer out the relationship of the colonies to Great Britain, the established tradition was state-supported religion. It was prevalent in Europe and many of the colonies had already adopted this practice. As in England, several of the colonies supported the Anglican Church. In Massachusetts, the state supported the Puritan Church and persecuted Quakers and Baptists.

Many believed that the church would collapse without the state providing financial support and enforcing religious doctrines. Likewise, many thought that the state would deteriorate without the moral and spiritual support of the church. The miracle was that the Founders came up with something entirely new: liberty of conscience, freedom of religion.”¹

In his book, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*, Steven Waldman says, “The Founding Faith was not Christianity and it was not secularism. It was religious liberty, a revolutionary formula for promoting faith by leaving it alone.”²

In the United States, we may worship as we choose. This frees us to make God our ultimate commitment. And when God is paramount, there will be times when we will oppose policies of our government. Totalitarian governments cannot allow their citizens to put God before state because they will not tolerate dissent. In the U.S., not only can we voice our protest, but we can influence the policies of our nation, which can make us an even better country.

One of the marvelous things about the United States of America is that many of our nation’s values emerged from religious values. Thus, we do not often find a great tension between patriotism and commitment to God. However, when one exists, our loyalty to God comes first.

I believe our faith can make our country better because it helps us spot pseudo-patriotism. Pseudo-patriotism claims that in times of emergency the government can take away certain rights, such as our right to protest or our right to privacy. Worse, pseudo-patriotism attempts to

destroy diversity while elevating intolerance. Pseudo-patriotism claims that real Americans are white, thus minorities can be persecuted. Pseudo-patriotism claims that real Americans are Christians, thus Muslims are not welcome. Pseudo-patriotism claims that real Americans are heterosexual, thus gays do not deserve the same civil rights. Pseudo-patriotism fails to grasp the importance of the Bill of Rights which declares that all people have certain rights that no government may usurp. The American flag is a powerful symbol of liberty and justice for all, and we must always be vigilant against any attempt to make it a symbol of censorship, bigotry, or inequality. We must never shy from declaring the American ideals whose roots derive from our religious faith: freedom and fairness, courage and kindness, justice and generosity, equality and empathy, sacrifice and sincerity, hope and hospitality.

In the folklore of the Slavic people there is a tale that the devil scratched the surface of the earth with long fingernails in order to separate people and to disrupt all unity. And so a bridge is a very powerful symbol for them. They see bridges as links between people; links between people who are otherwise separated by race or culture or wealth or religion or politics. To build a bridge is a great blessing. To destroy a bridge, the greatest sin.³

Our nation, great as it may be, has far too chasms today. People are still too often separated black from white, rich from poor, gay from straight, young from old, liberal from conservative. The old devil has scratched the surface in many places. However, we do not have to passively accept the status quo because we have the freedom to do something about it. We have the freedom to build bridges of understanding, bridges of compassion and bridges of justice. If we are faithful to God and good citizens of this nation, we will use our freedom to build bridges – bridges that will unite us as a people and enhance the lives of all.

NOTES

1. John M. Buchanan, “The First Freedom,” July 6, 2008.
2. Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*, (Random House, 2008), p.xvi.
3. John McClure, “Preaching Easter Faith at the Beginning of the New Millennium,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2000, p.41.