

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
July 1, 2007

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Scriptures: 1Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 12-25; Luke 9:51-62

Usually when the 4th of July rolls around and I am preparing my sermon, I try to side step the day. I am one of those who cringe when leaders make much ado about how the U.S. is a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles. (I usually think they just need to go back and study history a little better.) There are quite a few landmines, if you will, that lay in the territory of “God and Country”, so I usually steer clear of that kind of rhetoric. But today, because of the texts for the day, I’d like to address some of those issues directly.

Wednesday is the 4th of July, and, if it is not raining, there might even be fireworks to go see somewhere. When I was growing up, the 4th of July was a big deal. Instead of working, usually putting up hay, our family would have a picnic with some long-time family friends, and at the end of the day, we would go see fireworks somewhere. But mostly what I remember about the 4th of July was that it was a celebration of freedom.

We call it Independence Day, for the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was all about freedom, and about how my country, the U.S.A. was the greatest country in the world because of our freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion. As I got older and took U.S. History and Government, I learned about how all those things are spelled out in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights: democracy, the right to vote, the three branches of government and the balance of power. All of these made the U.S.A. the great country it was.

But, on the 4th of July, it all came back to freedom, . And I still believe that, that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are remarkable documents. The principles spelled out in them are inspired. Okay, so they were inspired mostly by the colonists’ deep desire to never again be under the tyranny of self-interested rulers like King George of England. Everything was written so that couldn’t happen. So no one could take their freedom away from them.

In the second lesson for today, Paul is also talking about freedom. And in some ways it is the same kind of freedom, the freedom from the tyranny of self-interested leaders. In that day, it was the religious authorities who used religion and the laws about religious observances to manipulate and exploit the people for their own gain.

Paul is reminding them how Christ’s death set them free from all those requirements. They were free to live without the worry over whether or not they had done enough to please a demanding God. That kind of freedom dug into the income the temple generated for the priests. No wonder the religious leaders were upset.

But it is very interesting to see what Paul has to say about what to do with this freedom. He writes: Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another...live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the

flesh. That is to say, live out the fruits of the Spirit: love joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

One could say that this principle is at the heart of the entire Christian ethic: do not use anything for self-indulgence, don't use your strength for self-indulgence, don't use your wealth solely for your own interests, don't use your status in society for your own advancement. Applied at a national level, that might be to say, "Don't use your freedom for self-indulgence, don't use your abundant resources only for yourselves, don't use your military strength for your own selfish interests, don't use your political influence only for your own advancement.

Instead, Paul says, 'through love, be slaves to one another.'" Love your neighbor as yourselves. Live lives guided by the Spirit, filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, patience, gentleness, and self-control. Some would say that the U.S. is in the condition it is in precisely because we have used our freedom for self-indulgence. We have ignored the plight of our neighbors, especially if they are not politically or economically important allies. We have not, especially at some particularly crucial moments, lived out love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness or self-control. So much for being a Christian nation.

In the Gospel text for today, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is gathering followers as he goes, those who are willing to leave behind the things that keep them stuck in old ways: society's expectations, accumulation of creature comforts, allegiance to something other than God's kingdom.

Maybe those followers knew what it would mean to follow Jesus, maybe they didn't. The point was they were ready to leave behind life as they knew it, to be part of something new, something that would change their world, something that could bring about Kingdom of God that Jesus kept talking about.

And the truth of the matter is that Jesus is still calling us to that something new, that Kingdom of God that transcends nations and political systems, that transcends self-indulgence and self-preservation. Being a part of the Kingdom of God is to live in that freedom that Paul talks about, the freedom from all the old shoulds and oughts in order to live a life of loving one's neighbor, indeed even of loving one's enemies.

I am planning to go watch some fireworks this Wednesday night. Somewhere along the way tears may well up when I listen to the national anthem. I will be grateful for the freedoms we have in this country. I hope we will all keep that freedom in perspective; it's the freedom to be part of something bigger called the Kingdom of God. It's the freedom to work for something more wonderful than our own well-being. It is the freedom to work for peace between nations, and for the well-being of all God's people. Amen.