

PROPER NINE, PENTECOST 4, YEAR C, JULY 3, 2022

Today being part of the Fourth of July weekend, I thought of a number of familiar words that capture our celebration of liberty, independence, freedom, and patriotism.

"Give me liberty or give me death." Patrick Henry. "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" from The Declaration of Independence.

These are words that we grew up with and more than likely memorized at some point in our lives. But there are a lot of other statements that are not as familiar but evoke the same concept about freedom, independence and liberty.

For instance, a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband John Adams as they were drafting the Declaration of Independence wrote: "I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

A portion of a letter by Martin Luther King Jr. from his Birmingham jail cell in 1963. "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained."

These excerpts from these various documents cry out the words freedom, independence and liberty. When the Continental Congress declared the separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain 246 years ago, liberty and independence was foremost in the minds of our nation's founders. But the idea of freedom and independence did not originate with them. In every age and across the world, human beings have, as the inscription on the Statue of Liberty reads, yearned to "breathe free." And they still do. How then do these words correlate with our faith? What does our faith teach us about freedom?

World history and biblical history fill volumes of people who fought for their freedom and independence. Three thousand years before the Declaration of Independence was drafted, the Hebrew people were in bondage in Egypt. They yearned for freedom. God sent a man named Moses who demanded of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" When Pharaoh refused, God helped Moses to deliver them.

A thousand years later, the people were again oppressed, by the tyranny of the Roman Empire and God sent a man named Jesus. He announced in his inaugural sermon that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives. . .to let the oppressed go free."

Freedom. Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. God created us, women and men, with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the will of our Living God for all creation to be free.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.' But, they found the strength and solace to endure and fight the oppression because of the freedom that they found in God.

Everything we know about God's desire for us is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. According to the Bible freedom is not license to do what you want to do. It is an opportunity to serve God. The exercise of true freedom is in serving your neighbor. Freedom is never just "freedom from," it's also "freedom to."

The Founding Fathers didn't just want to be free from foreign rule, they also aspired to create a new way of being in community. They wanted to build something that was more equitable and safeguarded against anyone getting too much power and influence. I believe true independence means we are freed into interdependence which means we are no longer to be lone rangers doing our own thing without regard for others. Our freedom depends on our interdependence with each other. We are stronger together.

In Deuteronomy, God's law is made clear for those who would set up a nation: Welcome the stranger with love, feed and clothe them and act with justice to the weakest and most marginalized in that community.

As Christians we have gifts and responsibilities that tell us that our freedom, liberty and independence is a function of fidelity to the law of love. When Jesus voiced the great commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, he was emphasizing this ethic of love that provides true freedom.

The great 20th- century religious thinker Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: "Basically love means being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."

In today's gospel, Jesus sends out 70 disciples to spread his word of love. He also commanded them to carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. In other words they were dependent on the people they would encounter to provide for them. You know being dependent on others is not always sign of weakness rather it can be a sign of strength. It is the ultimate sign that we trust another person, and it recognizes that we are, in fact, the Body of Christ, where we need everyone, with their gifts and specialties— and idiosyncrasies – in order to be complete.

God has made us as one human family, irrevocably bound to one another in God's heart and mind so that we are by nature motivated toward one another. The need of the other is really our own need. The suffering of the other is, in a real sense, our own suffering. This is freedom to recognize and empathize with others so that we act to ensure everyone's freedom.

Abigail Adams again wrote, "I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us."

One of America's greatest gifts to the world is the notion of religious liberty. Unlike Christian nationalism, which is a blatant distortion of the gospel and the first amendment, the state cannot impose religion, and all our citizens are free to exercise religion or not,

according to their own wishes. But that does not mean that people of faith do not have a crucial role to play in the life of our nation.

We ought to be working every day to create a society that is marked by concern for the common good. We should be listening for the voices of those who are not being heard. We should be speaking out against excessive self-indulgence and naming the corrosive consequences of greed and power. We need to remember and recognize that patriotism doesn't pander to divisiveness but seeks to confirm and celebrate the we as in we the people.

Learned Hand was one of our country's most outstanding jurists. He wrote about the spirit of liberty writing these eloquent words:

The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; it weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; it remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, 2,000 years ago, taught humanity a lesson it has never learned but has never quite forgotten: that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.

The most patriotic thing you and I could do for our country is to live into Jesus' calling as those who are appointed and sent out to be agents of his love, grace, truth, justice, and peace.

On this Independence Day weekend, let us remember it is God who gives us our ultimate freedom, and let us commit ourselves anew to extending liberty and justice to everyone who seeks it, without partiality for God depends on us to bring that freedom to others. Amen