

Sunday, July 4th 2010 Message
Community of Faith - a Lutheran Congregation in Mission for Christ
Lake Oswego, Oregon
David Beatty

OT: 1 Samuel 8:1-21 [19-21]
Epistle: 1 Peter 2:13-17 [13-14]; Romans 13:1-7 [1-2]
Gospel: John 8:32-36 [32&36]

GOOD MORNING!

I'm honored to give you my perspective on the 4th of July.

Independence Day holds mixed feelings for me. It is a day of rejoicing for our freedom from what many Americans living in 1776 considered to be a tyranny perpetrated by a distant and out-of-touch empire. But for me I am also reminded of friends who gave their lives so that our freedom might continue. It is indeed a day to rejoice in our freedom from the tyranny of human kings but also to remember the thousands of Americans who sacrificed so much so that we might be free today.

The 56 men who put their names on our Declaration of Independence were also conflicted. They were well aware that they might be signing their own death warrant - for had we lost our war to liberate ourselves from England, they could very likely have been hung as traitors to King and country.

Even today, many Britons remain baffled as to why we took up arms against our mother country. To them, it only makes sense that the American colonies should have been taxed in order to repay the debt that Britain had incurred fighting the French and Indian War and thus protecting the Colonies. To many Britons, those 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were self-serving merchants and plantation owners who were only interested in increasing their bottom line by avoiding their fair share of the cost of their own defense.

During my Air Force career, and especially during my time serving with many British friends on NATO staffs, I have had occasion to reflect on their perspective, and to explain to them why we were compelled to fight for our independence. It was not about money at all. It was all about the freedom to

chart our own course in the world, and especially in our tiny part of it on the east coast of the vast wilderness that was 1776 America. To us, the policies put forth by King George and his government were designed to keep the Americans reliant upon England for everything from manufactured goods to defense. But, unlike most of the other citizens of the British Empire in 1776, we Americans had become self reliant - from the very beginning of our adventure on the wild American continent, we were forced to rely upon ourselves for defense against external attack and we had our own very effective and experienced militia prepared for that defense. From the very beginning we were forced to make do with what we had on hand, to manufacture our own tools and equipment, and to feed ourselves. And, from our perspective, we were the ones who had won the victory over the French in North America, with a little bit of help from the other Englishmen living on the far side of the Atlantic.

Unreasonable demands were made on us without our consent, and even without our participation in the decision making process. Central policies were put in force with which we disagreed - we had no say in how those policies were developed and resented them being forced upon us by a distant authority out of touch with what it's citizens wanted and needed. Indeed, that distant authority seemed not the least bit interested in even learning what we wanted and needed, nor was that authority interested in our input. That distant authority even sent its army to make sure we followed those unwelcome policies and to quell any hint of disagreement.

Many Americans had fled England (and other European countries) for religious reasons and wanted nothing but to be left alone. The increasing control exercised over the daily lives of American colonists was viewed with alarm by those who held differing views of God's Word than did the English government. The arrogance of those put in leadership positions over us only compounded our fear. Some of those who spoke out against this arrogance were imprisoned.

So we revolted. We broke away from England. Many of our fellow American colonists took this to be too radical a step and remained loyal to England - and our war of Independence became as much a civil war as it was a war against English tyranny. This was not a small thing to do, nor was it taken lightly by any of those Americans involved. Thousands of Americans died. Families were torn apart - some of my own ancestors were compelled to flee to Canada because they remained loyal to England. A war by a colony for independence had not been fought in

modern times. For men to put themselves above the God-given authority of kings and princes was radical thinking for 18th century Europe. It was indeed "the world turned upside down" as a song popular in London in 1782 put it. Our split with England was not a quiet divorce.

So much for my perspective on the history of it all. This brings me back to my mixed feelings about our 4th of July, our national Independence Day. It has become almost a cliché to say that our freedom does not come free, but I have seen this saying play out in real life.

While I was serving in our military, especially while overseas, I was ever mindful that I was part of a shield protecting my fellow Americans from attack. Our constant goal was to detect such an attack and prevent it - or deflect it upon ourselves if we could not deter it. Rarely did we reflect on the personal sacrifices we were making - we all knew the consequence of failure. There was never a time when we would hesitate to lay down our lives to protect our country - it was (and continues to be) second nature for me to leap to the physical defense of my country and my people. But this is not just a trait of your military - I see this courage daily in our police and firemen and countless, nameless ordinary Americans.

Independence Day marked the start of a never ending struggle for the freedom to make our own decisions about how we will live and worship God. This must never mean that we should force our religion or way of life on our neighbors - but it also must never mean that we should cower behind our protective oceans awaiting attack from neighbors who would force their religion and way of life upon us. And it must also mean that we obey God's Word over the words of men.

And the 4th of July has meaning for people far beyond the shores of America. It has served as a model for countless peoples and nations around the world of how men and women can and should rule themselves as equals UNDER GOD.

For it is abundantly clear that our form of government was meant to function under Biblical authority taking guidance from God's Holy Word.

The men who framed our nation were devout Christians. At least 2 of the 56 signers of our Declaration were ministers. All were educated men and knew their Bible. They were well aware of 1 Samuel 8:7 - wherein God declares that the

elders of Israel rejected Him by asking for a human king - but they were also aware of Paul's words in Romans 13 - "The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted" and of 1 Peter 2:17 - "...fear God, honor the king" and of Matthew 22:21 - "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's." They also knew Zechariah 14:9 - "The LORD will be king over the whole earth." So our Founding Fathers were torn between rebelling against the king of England (thus removing a human king and reinstituting a nation directly under God) - and between Paul's admonition to obey human civil authority. The choice was not an easy one.

But when it is a matter of obeying God or obeying human authority acting contrary to God's Word, the choice is clearly stated in Acts 5:29 - "We must obey God rather than men."

When human authority acts against God's Word, we MUST obey God's Word. When those in authority place human tradition above the Word of God, we must remain true to God. In 2 Timothy 4 Paul calls upon us to "Preach the Word" and warns us that "...the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine."

God has granted us the freedom to choose to accept His gift of salvation - His grace - or to follow false authority to our own destruction.

But He also has given us the wisdom to discern false authority and false doctrine - and God has given us His Holy Word as a guide to that discernment. In 2 Peter 3:17 we are warned to be on our guard against those who distort Scripture so that we will not be "...carried away by the error of lawless men..."

What then are we to do when faced with authority that would lead us astray - away from the Word of God, away from just government, away from freedom? In Matthew 20:25-27, Christ gives clear guidance to his disciples that we too can use: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave..." I believe that God used our Founding Fathers to throw off the yoke of a human king and establish a new kind of nation - one in which the only king is Christ and all citizens are servants to Him and to one another. They knew exactly what they were doing. God used Nebuchadnezzar to free the Israelites from the rule

of Hebrew kings - and God used the Americans of 1776 to free us from the rule of human kings.

I am also reminded that Christ came to offer freedom from Mosaic Law - to free the Jews from the concept that the path to salvation was in their own hands and could be obtained by their own works through adherence to Jewish law. By the time of Christ's ministry on earth, it had become impossible for humans to follow all Mosaic Law - all men, then were sinners. In John 8:31, Christ tells us that if we hold to His teachings we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. In Romans 10:4, Paul affirms this freedom by declaring that, "Christ is the end of the law." This freedom from Mosaic Law is, of course, meant for the entire world and not just the Jews alone, and the early Jewish Christian leaders agreed that new Gentile Christians need not follow Jewish law and tradition in order to obtain salvation - all believers are saved by grace alone through Jesus Christ. Freedom indeed!

My path to Community of Faith was also a journey of freedom. I grew up in the military system of non-denominational chapels but only started attending church regularly when I entered the Air Force Academy - and then only because we were required by Air Force regulation to attend chapel. I joined the Academy cadet choir not only because I enjoyed singing, but also because it was a way to get off the campus on concert trips around the country. In 1989, I moved back to Colorado Springs and the wife of one of my Academy instructors drafted me into the choir at a Lutheran church in Black Forest, Colorado - I thus became a Lutheran, and I can clearly see the hand of God in all these coincidences because that is where I met Linda. Linda has been a true spiritual mentor to me and I continue to be blessed daily by her wisdom.

On the 28th of January, many of you declared your independence from the ELCA which led to leaving Our Savior's Lutheran Church. My path to independence began in 2000 when I returned from 5 years overseas and became acquainted with ELCA politics. I entered into dialogs with pastors, bishops and even directly with the ELCA presiding bishop. My path to independence accelerated a year ago following attendance at the Oregon synod annual convention in Eugene, and my personal declaration of independence came on the 17th of January 2010 when my ELCA church refused to amend its mission statement to include even a mention of the Word of God. I felt lost and abandoned. I had been an associate member of the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ for about a year then, and got word

of the formation of what became Community of Faith in early February. The hand of God was again clearly moving in my life. From the first moment I stepped into your fellowship I felt a tremendous burden lifted from my shoulders and I thank you and God for that! I am now not only free in Christ, but also free in worship - and truly free of any human barrier between me and Christ.

So to me, July 4th is a day to reflect on the journey we have taken as a nation and as a people. It is a day to reflect on what it means to be an American. It is a day to remember our triumphs without downplaying our failures. It is a day to celebrate our many freedoms - freedom to worship as we choose without being forced to bow to distant human authority - freedom to live at peace with our neighbors - to travel throughout our country without permission from our government - to eat what we wish, dress how we wish, read what we wish and listen to what we wish - freedom to live and work and play in harmony with our neighbors without fear of reprisal by our government. And it is a day to be thankful for those freedoms and to be thankful for all the men and women who stand ready to defend those freedoms.

Today is also a day to celebrate the triumph of the rule of God over the rule of men and to celebrate the triumph of the Word of God over the traditions of men.

And it is a day to reflect on the journey to freedom that we, the people of Community of Faith, have taken.

Lastly, today is a day for me to proclaim that Christ is my king, that I am indeed free in Christ and now, with the Community of Faith - a Lutheran Congregation in Mission for Christ - I feel truly free in worship.

God has blessed America, and I see His blessing here!

Amen.