

“Let Freedom Ring”
Galatians 5: 13-23, 25

While Independence Day does not fall within the church year calendar as a festival to be observed, it is nonetheless appropriate that something be done within the liturgy of this holiday weekend to give thanks for the freedoms we share in this great land, including the freedom to worship.

I don't know how you all are feeling this morning, but I'm finding it to be somewhat difficult to celebrate America this holiday weekend. I know I should be careful to keep politics out of the pulpit, you know that separation of church and state thing, but I think I don't feel like doing that this morning. To put it mildly, I'm disappointed in our country's current leadership. In our charter document, The Declaration of Independence, we declare that we “are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights [sic], that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet it seems as if some of these fundamental freedoms are being taken away from all but the most fortunate among us.

This begs the question, “How or what can we celebrate this weekend with our country so out of whack?”

I can fly a flag and sing patriotic songs with the best of them. But, I have also a duty when standing in the pulpit, to speak prophetically.

For us religious liberals, patriotism is not a simple matter; like the rest of life, it is complicated, and we'll never all agree on one single interpretation of it. Yet we know we share certain liberal religious ideals that relate directly to patriotism: the dream of a peaceful world where no person is exploited or subjugated; the dream of life in balance; the dream of a more harmonious existence for all humanity. As religious liberals, our patriotism will be colored by these liberal religious ideals.

And so on this Independence Day weekend, may we dedicate ourselves once again to an earth made fair, and all her people free.

Our liberties that were won in the War for Independence are a great heritage. The Constitution that was later drafted and ratified is also a great gift that has been extended to all of us. The potential of this country has always been great, but so are the spiritual and moral dangers we face. If you love this nation, if you have the kind of patriotism that is deeper than flag waving and emotional songs can stimulate, the kind of patriotism that a spiritual believer ought to have, I urge you now and every day to pray. Be an intercessor, and lift up your voice to the Divine for Her mercy on this nation.

Religion was not a major cause of the American Revolution. But the Revolutionary struggle subtly interacted with religion, then quickly produced changes that transformed traditional European relations between government and religion and made America a beacon of religious freedom for people everywhere.

It is a little-known fact that it was a Baptist, John Brown of Rhode Island, who is said to have begun the Revolutionary War. John Brown was a brother of the better known Nicholas Brown, after whom Brown University was named. Every friend of liberty should revere the name of John Brown.

Mr. John Brown was the owner of twenty ships, and every one of them could have been seized at any time by the British navy. In 1772 a British armed schooner called the Gaspee entered Narragansett Bay to carry out orders from the British commissioners of custom in Boston, with a view to prevent violations of the revenue laws. The Gaspee had been a continual annoyance to the various ship owners as she interfered with their business. On June 9, 1772, the Gaspee ran aground. Hearing the report, Mr. Brown immediately ordered eight large boats manned by sixty-four of his armed men to be placed in the charge of Captain Abraham Whipple. About 2:00 A.M., Mr. Brown and his ships approached the

Gaspee. Two shots were exchanged, one of which wounded a British Lieutenant named Duddingston. That was actually the first British blood to be shed in the War of Independence. The crew and officers left the Gaspee quickly, and Captain Whipple blew up the ship. John Brown was the last man on board before explosives on the ship were detonated.

In Bartlett's Colonial Records, during four years from the beginning of 1776, Brown's name occurs in "important committees and in connection with various public services twenty-six times." Bartlett mentioned John Brown more than any other person in his volume. We reflect with pleasure that on May 4, 1776, two months before the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, Rhode Island, the strongly Baptist state, repudiated every form of allegiance to King George III.

Changing tracks... This past week I came across a wonderful quote by Martin Luther King Jr. that I would like to share. Some of you may have heard it. It is from his speech made on April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City. (By the way, Riverside Church is an American Baptist Church.) I can't help but bemoan the fact that seemingly few leaders of our country heeded these words. This is what he said:

“We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

It's no news to any of us that in recent decades this country seems to have stepped right into the abyss of choosing things over people. However, knowing how to influence any significant change over our country's situation is daunting. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, we do not easily assume the task of opposing our government's policy. As Dr. King said, “The human spirit moves with great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought.” And he adds,

“Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the United States today, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty.”

I’d like to challenge Lake Street Church to take action. The Peace and Justice Committee (and I) are proposing a summer book for anyone to read. The book is titled *No Is Not Enough* and the author is Naomi Klein. This book emphasizes that saying “no” to the current political situation is not enough – that we have the power to say “yes”, and if we do say “yes” together we can find a way out of the current madness. This book comes highly recommended by Peace and Justice and others. They report that Naomi Klein makes suggestions and offers ideas that might truly make a difference as we agonize about where this country is headed. The idea is that after we all read this book during the summer, in September the Peace and Justice Committee is recommending we have an all-church event to discuss what we have read. More details will be forthcoming. The name and author of the book is in this morning’s bulletin.

I’d like to end with this morning’s message with another quote from Dr. King. It’s amazing and sad to me that when he said the following he was speaking against the Vietnam War, yet the same sentiments still prevail today. Here these words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “Surely this madness must cease. We must stop now. I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor in America who are paying the price of smashed hopes. ... I speak as a citizen of the world and for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation: The great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.” May we all hear these inspired words of Dr. King.