

HAPPY BIRTHDAY EVERYBODY

Romans 7: 21-8:6; Matthew 11:25-30

Sunday, July 5, 2020 – Pollocksville

Sermons around the July 4th Holiday are always tough. You have to decide whether you want to concentrate on something historical and patriotic, or whether you want to concentrate on the suggested lectionary scriptures or another passage of scripture, or whether you want can pull it all together – both the historical/patriotic and the scripture into one neat package. Well, most you know that my historical education will undoubtedly mean we talk a little bit about the birth of our nation, but I wanted to try and pull something together using the suggested lectionary texts. And just to let you know, I did not follow the Genesis text – as T. Wes has been doing for the last several weeks – primarily because I can't seem to connect the story of Isaac finding his bride Rebekah and our text from Romans and Matthew and the July 4th holiday.

So – first the historical patriotic piece. Here we are on the day after the Fourth of July – Independence Day. This is the one holiday the three-day week-end people haven't tried to move to a Monday – because the date itself is such a powerful icon: the anniversary of our nation's birth with the signing of the Declaration of Independence on a sultry Philadelphia summer day. A quick aside – both federal and state governments still get a three-day week-end out of this year, with July 3rd as the holiday – certainly can't expect folks to consider Saturday as a holiday.

Folks celebrate the holiday in a variety of ways. This year will obviously be different with many parades cancelled and folks struggling with social distancing as they try to have family gatherings at Bogue Sound or the ocean or at the lake or in the mountains. Some communities have cancelled their fireworks displays. But others will continue on, and many set off fireworks with Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture playing in the background. I recently read a blog in which the author wonders why we Americans celebrate fireworks on July 4th with a piece written by a Russian composer celebrating the defeat of the Russians over Napoleon's French forces in 1812. I guess it has to do with America's love for cannons. And remember, we Americans love to take our patriotic songs from someone else. The "Star Spangled Banner" is set to the tune of an English drinking song, and "My Country 'Tis of Thee" borrows from the British national anthem, "God Save the Queen."

Perhaps one of the ways we should be celebrating our nation's birthday more than we do is to read the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson wrote it – Benjamin Franklin edited it. It is an amazing document, announcing to the world that the 13 British colonies in the New World are now independent, and it eloquently expresses the reasons why. While the majority of the document lists all the colonial grievances against King George III, it is the opening statements that are so powerful.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. 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

These are “no going back words.” Words that both launched a nation and charted its course. Words we memorize in high school and spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to. Words that frame the very essence of what it is to be an American. Words worth celebrating on the anniversary of their signing – the anniversary of our freedom.

We don't have time for more history lessons on the wars we have fought to maintain our freedom as well as fight for the freedom of others. We don't have time to even discuss the various cultural and social wars that have gone before and seem to be more prevalent during today's struggles. But I think we can all agree that things don't always go the way we think they should. I'm sure many of us do not always agree with our nation's policies and practices, but I hope we can all agree that we are grateful for our country and the freedoms we enjoy, because the freedom to disagree and dissent, the responsibility to disagree and dissent, and to participate in the national conversation is close to what the American experiment was all about.

And the experiment continues to challenge us, doesn't it? The Founding Fathers never promised smooth sailing – never a pothole in the journey – no wrong turns and not a detour in sight, did they? It would be nice, but it doesn't seem to work out that way, does it? And now, hopefully, my transition into the scripture lessons for today. As Christians – as children of God – we have been given spiritual freedom. And as we all know from experience, our spiritual

journeys just don't always seem to work out the way we want. Perhaps there is some comfort in finding out that it didn't work that way for Paul, either. Paul, the poster-child for dramatic, blinded-by-the-light, born again experiences had his share of ups and downs in the spiritual journey department. Listen again to a portion of Paul's lament to the Romans, read this time from "The Message":

"What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. For I know the law, but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help!! I realize that I don't have what it takes, I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway."

Any of that sound familiar? Can you truthfully say "been there – done that – got the t-shirt to prove it?" I think we can all admit that far too often, though we delight in good, we end up doing far less than the good we hoped for. We're free to make right choices, and all too often make the wrong ones. It seems that the very freedom God has given us – as a nation and as individuals – is also the challenge to use that freedom responsibly. And no matter how hard we try, we can't seem to do that on our own. Freedom – whether secular or spiritual – comes with a price tag.

As a nation, the freedom we enjoy was bought for us by those who went on before: our founding mothers and fathers who had the courage and vision to imagine a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." They made the down payment – in blood, sweat, and tears – and subsequent generations have made "balloon payments" ever since:

claiming and reclaiming that vision of a nation with liberty and justice for all. Working to include black men in the proposition that all are created equal during the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, and the challenge continues. Expanding the vision to include women in the proposition that all are created equal – from the 19th Amendment in 1920 giving women the vote to the ERA, and the challenge continues. None of us are free unless all of us are free; the birthing of a nation begun in 1776 continues today.

Likewise our spiritual freedom – our salvation – was bought for us by the generations who have gone before. Abraham and Sarah and their faithfulness to their covenant with YAHWEH; the Hebrew people who received God’s law through Moses and were called again and again into faithfulness by the prophets; and Jesus – our Lord and Savior – who paid the ultimate price of his life upon the cross that we might live. Jesus paid the once-and-for-all price that WE are called to both claim and re-claim as we proclaim the Good News of God in Jesus Christ in our generation. It’s the price we are asked to pay for our freedom.

As we celebrate freedom this Independence Day, both as Americans and as Christians, Paul’s experience offers parallels to our own – as a church and as a culture. For as much as we desire to do good, we far too often fall short of the mark – and then wonder what went wrong. As a church, again and again, our ability to proclaim the Gospel is hampered by internal squabbles – quarrels about power that masquerade as debates over doctrine, polity, and scripture – fights with each other that so consume our energy we have nothing left to give

to the work of calling others to Christ. We may intend good – at least consciously – and yet far too often hurt and pain are the result. As a country, over and over, our efforts to ensure the freedom of one people seem to lead to the oppression of another. Again, we don't have time to discuss the laundry lists of situations, but suffice it to say that it seems that no matter how hard we work to "do good," some evil fallout is the result. And here at home, as hard as we try to make the Pledge of Allegiance come true, we have yet to truly insure liberty and justice for all. Where do we turn for answers?

Look again at Paul's words as contained in The Message:

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

Paul turns to Jesus Christ. Look at the familiar words in our passage from Matthew. "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden," he says, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me – for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." These are words of promise that there is nothing we have to bear by ourselves; nothing too heavy for Jesus to bear with us. Listen again to this invitation of profound reassurance as offered in The Message:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—

watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Our good friend, the Rev. Dr. Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, offers commentaries on the weekly lectionary lessons, and with acknowledgement to her thoughts, I wanted to share some of what she says about this passage.

"The demands of our relationship with Christ and the accompanying demands for discipleship can be wearying. Trying to respond to the demands of the day in our crazy world while also being open to God's gracious care is a difficult course. "Doing" and "being" are tricky to balance – all the more so when a pandemic has us shutting down and staying in. Perhaps Jesus knew how we would struggle with these things. In our passage this morning, he offers three short but significant words – COME, ALL, REST

COME – the relentless invitation of God, who is always reaching out, always welcoming with open arms. Come – whoever we are, wherever we are, however we are. Come as we yearn to live responsibly in this moment. Come, even as we admit our limitations. Come, even though our sins are many.

ALL – Not just some – not just the qualified or the capable or the knowledgeable, but ALL. Those who do not do the good they want to do; those with scars; those with baggage; those with questions, doubts, and fears. This is the inclusive vision of the gospel. Come...All.

REST – It’s what Jesus offers in the end – rest from the storms, the stress, the hardships and circumstances that are before us every day. Here is someone who seeks our good, who comforts our weariness and bears our burdens. Jesus does not offer us an exemption from pain and sorrow but he does offer us himself. Rest, knowing that God has overcome all things that would hurt or destroy; rest, knowing that we are loved; rest, knowing, believing, trusting that in life and in death we belong to God; rest, restoration, and renewal for what’s ahead as the journey continues. COME...ALL...REST

Jesus’ words in verse 28 may remind us of the words on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuge of your teeming shore. Send these homeless, tempest tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” The difference? Freedom is not found in a place – like America – but in a PERSON – the One who guides us, strengthens us, feeds us, sustains us.

This morning, let us not only say Happy Birthday America on the 244th anniversary of our Nation’s freedom, but let us say Happy Birthday Everybody as we celebrate the freedom we have been given in Jesus Christ – strengthened to go out and do the work we’ve been given to do – to be Christ’s Body to the world.

AMEN