

“Freedom in Christ”

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Galatians 5:1; 13-15

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Well, did everyone have a good 4th of July yesterday? July 4th's conjure up all sorts of images for me. Images from my childhood, when my sisters and I could hardly wait for that day to get here, so my Dad could take us to the fireworks stand first thing. He bought us firecrackers and smoke bombs, sparklers and roman candles for when it turned dark, and I'm sure lots of other good stuff that I can't remember. My favorite thing, though, were those little blackish-gray pellets you would light—black snakes, I think they were called. We played with fire from morning till bedtime on that day.

I grew up in a small town, and there was always a “hometown” 4th of July parade in the morning. There was a lot of flag waving, people costumed up like Uncle Sam and let freedom ringing going on. Then, in the evening, we had a little cabin on Lake Ponca, and we would go out there, with a couple of other families and have a BBQ and watch the fireworks display out over the lake.

Does that sound like any one else's remembrances of childhood 4th's?

I'm sure there are a lot of other things about the 4th of July I don't remember from my childhood, and I know I learned all the details of Independence Day when I was a child in school, but you know, it's been a

while since I have had a history class, so I went back and did a little research about our 4th of July holiday.

In a nutshell--

The 2nd Continental Congress voted on the 2nd of July to approve a resolution of independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain. After that resolution passed, the actual Declaration of Independence, which was constructed by a committee of 5, with Thomas Jefferson being the main contributor, was approved on July 4, 1776. And the next fact is one of the reasons I felt ok about talking about the 4th of July on the 5th of July— Wikipedia stated that it is actually a myth that the Declaration of Independence was signed on the 4th of July. It said that it was actually the 2nd of August that the document was actually signed. So I think we're safe talking about our country's independence after the customary celebration day.

The history of our nation is actually pretty young when compared to European history, but we do have a history we can all be proud of. Have you ever heard people say that history is cyclical, or that history repeats itself?

3000 years before Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Hebrew people were under the heavy yoke of slavery imposed by the Pharaoh of Egypt. They longed for freedom and saw no

way out. God loved God's people, so God sent Moses, and God set his people free from the yoke of oppression.

1000 years later, the people were oppressed again. They were oppressed by both the tyranny of the Roman Empire and by the powers and principalities of the world. God sent Jesus to earth. In Jesus' inaugural sermon in Luke 4 he said he came "*to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives. . .to let the oppressed go free.*"

That same liberating Jesus, according to John's Gospel, said later to his followers, "*If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and the will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

One of the main, if not **the** theme of our country's Independence Day is freedom. After all, that is what we celebrate, our independence from Great Britain. The notion of freedom, though, does not originate with Thomas Jefferson, or with Moses, or with any other human being. The notion of freedom originates from God.

God could've made us like puppets, so that when God wanted us to do something, God would pull our strings and we would act, but God didn't. We were created with the capacity and the **responsibility** to act as free moral agents.

Our desire for freedom, you see, is not simply a function of our own human spirit; its source is nothing less than the free will of our loving God.

There is a great paradox at the very heart of the Christian faith, that is, **that when we are the most free; we are more tied to Christ and surrendered to the Spirit. We are most free when we are most bonded or tied to Christ.**

Have you ever noticed that those who have made a commitment to bond themselves to Christ—to serve others—don't seem to think they are missing out on anything?

Take this little quiz. When do you feel better about yourself—when you go out and buy yourself a new outfit, or when you donate clothing to the thrift store? When you are a couch potato for the afternoon watching the ball game on TV or when you are out there coaching for the little league team? What about when you prepare a special dessert for yourself, or when you deliver that dessert to a shut-in?

You see, the freedom we ring when we are talking about our nation and the freedom we gain through being yoked with Christ are really different. They both speak about a freedom from oppression, but in very different ways. We have probably all heard that with all freedom comes responsibility.

With the freedom we enjoy by living in this nation we all know we have responsibilities. The freedom to work means we must be a good citizen and obey the laws so we can remain in society and not in jail in

order to be a productive part of society. We have the responsibility of voting and of paying taxes.

When we enjoy freedom in Christ, our responsibility is to faithfulness and to love.

Christ calls us to agape love—a sacrificial love that is bonded to Christ. We are called to love the Lord with all our heart, our mind, and our soul and to *love your neighbor* as yourself. To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of me, myself and I. To be truly free means to be able to move beyond self and move into the risk of loving and serving others. To be free is to be free **for** responsibility, not to be free **from** responsibility.

One of our freedoms included in The Declaration of Independence is the “Pursuit of Happiness.” However, this pursuit of happiness can become very self-centered. Pursuing happiness that is only focused on one’s self will never bring true happiness, or genuine joy, or fulfilling peace.

Freedom in Christ means that through real spiritual communities—such as our congregation here, old barriers of nation, race, class and gender are overcome when we come together in communion at one table-- The Lord’s table, at which we partake in a few minutes.

It is when we, with all our brothers and sisters around the world are bonded to Christ, when we are faithful that the Lord God is one God, maker

of heaven and earth, and when we love and serve humanity in a selfless way, that we most enjoy freedom. Freedom in Christ is a pure gift of grace.

A synonym for freedom is liberty. Liberty is defined as the freedom from oppression or slavery. Learned Hand was a famed American judge and an avid supporter of free speech. He is generally considered to be one of the most influential American judges *never* to have served on the Supreme Court of the United States. In his “Spirit of Liberty” speech, he asked himself the question, “**What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty?**” These eloquent words were his reply: “I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes.

What is this liberty that must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not the freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty and leads straight to its overthrow.

What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. **The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women;** the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; **the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that 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.”

May this be our pledge of allegiance—that we strive for *that* kind of kingdom on earth, where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest. May we all enjoy true freedom this 4th of July weekend and always. Keep faithful, keep on loving your neighbor, and keep yourself bonded to Christ, for when we honor *those* responsibilities, we experience true freedom in Christ.

Amen