

Love-Abiding Citizens

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21; Galatians 5:13-26

July 3, 2005

This weekend our nation is celebrating 229 years of independence from British rule. We remember the great words of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We express gratitude for the freedom in which we live in this country.

It is also an appropriate occasion to reflect upon the proper use of freedom. Sometimes we take our freedom for granted. Sometimes we abuse our freedom. In our culture we have often mistaken freedom to be synonymous with autonomy or self-rule. Freedom is not an excuse to do anything we want. As Paul wrote in Galatians, freedom is not an opportunity for self-indulgence. It is an opportunity for love and service. Even the founders of our nation had this in mind. The last line of the Declaration of Independence contains these words: “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” There is an underlying sense that the purpose of freedom is to build a community of mutuality where the needs of all people are met.

The brave souls who signed the Declaration of Independence weren’t declaring their right to do whatever they pleased for their own self-realization and gratification. They were declaring independence in order to become a new nation. Perhaps more than anyone else in history, they knew that freedom from external political coercion was freedom to serve the common good. They knew that it was going to require serious sacrifice: people were going to die for it, and fight to defend it, and work very hard to maintain it.

Webster’s Dictionary has 15 definitions of the word “free,” including these: To be free is not to be subject to the control or domination of another. To be free is to have no obligations or commitments. Free is not costing anything. To be free is not to be united with, attached to, or combined with anything else.

Those are indeed valid definitions of freedom, but when applied to life in community, they can lead to moral chaos. One of the dangers of freedom is that it can destroy a sense of community. There seems to be a tendency in our society today toward an individualistic interpretation of

freedom. People seem to feel no sense of obligation to one another or need to be united in common pursuits. People tend to pursue their own needs and desires, oblivious to the common good. When freedom turns into a relentless quest of individual goals lacking any moral commitment to others, it becomes inhumane and destructive. Freedom can easily be abused and a cover for our own evil desires. We might use others as a means to our own ends. That kind of self-indulgence is what Paul warns against.

Freedom may turn out to be more difficult than slavery. When we lived under another's rule and authority, choices were made for us. Freedom poses new responsibilities. Now the choices are ours. Instead of the law defining our conduct, we need to exercise our own judgment in deciding the most responsible course of action to be taken. Freedom actually makes greater demands of us.

From a Christian perspective, freedom would be defined contrary to Webster's definitions. Freedom does entail obligations and commitments to our neighbors, ourselves, and our God. Freedom is costly, because it demands sacrifice for the sake of another's freedom. Freedom does require unity with our human brothers and sisters, solidarity in the struggle to preserve freedom, and a mutual sharing of one another's burdens. We need to exercise the gift of freedom responsibly and wisely.

Conscientious freedom is complemented by moral norms and values that guide behavior. Our rights and freedom are protected by the Constitution, but our exercise of those rights is governed by our moral disciplines. Paul emphasizes that our use of freedom must not violate the greatest commandment of love. We must ask ourselves, is this action congruent with my love of God? Although I have freedom of speech to say whatever I want, is my speech guided by love of neighbor? If our actions and our speech are not guided by the higher moral discipline of love, we abuse the freedom given to us.

A nine-year old girl observed a friend at school shivering in the play yard during an especially cruel cold snap. Realizing that her friend didn't have the money to spend on a warmer coat, this little girl promptly promised to buy a coat for her. But when the little girl went to the local Goodwill store to make her purchase, she was surprised that the coat cost more than anticipated. Nevertheless, she was determined to keep her word to her friend, even though the coat cost every single coin she had saved in her piggy bank.

This splurge of her carefully saved funds caught her parents by surprise and caused them some concern. When they questioned the wisdom

of their daughter's actions, she defended herself by saying, "But I promised her, and she needed it!"

Her parents were silenced and impressed by their daughter's free and sacrificial use of her money which had been driven by love for her friend, her "neighbor."

In her book, *Reason for Hope*, Jane Goodall tells of another love-abiding citizen. Mohammad Yunus was an economics professor in Bangladesh when his country fell into the grip of a terrible famine in 1974. "The streets of Dacca became increasingly crowded with those who had used their last strength to walk to the capital in search of food. They sat or lay in the streets, 'skeletons covered by rags.' They died by the score. It was a life-changing experience for Mohammad Yunus, who was, at the time, teaching economics at the university there."

Suddenly he chose to leave academic life and find out why people were dying, slowly and horribly, of hunger in the streets around him. "He visited a nearby village, and talked to a twenty-one-year-old woman, Sufia Degum, who was making bamboo stools. Her story was the story of thousands of women like her. She bought the bamboo for the equivalent of 22 U.S. cents that she borrowed from a *paikarw*, or middleman. To repay her loan, she had to sell him the stools at the end of each day. Her profit was the equivalent of 2 cents—on a good day. She could not borrow from a moneylender, as the interest rate was far too high. There was no way, no way at all, that she could ever break, for herself or her children, the vicious cycle of hunger and poverty: she had no way of getting hold of the 22 cents that could start her on her way to independence.

"There were forty-two people in the village who were in the same position as Sufia. The total amount of money they needed to borrow to start their businesses was something less than \$27. Mohammad Yunus, with \$27 from his pocket, made these loans. He tried to persuade Bangladeshi banks to start a program of providing credit to people living in poverty. But the answer was always the same: 'The poor are not creditworthy' – even when it was shown that they did, indeed, pay back their tiny loans.

"And so Mohammad Yunus himself started a bank that would eventually bring new hope and a new life to millions of the poorest of the poor. The Grameen Bank, officially launched in 1983, expanded into other countries and would, within the next fifteen years, make loans, all very small, in excess of \$2 billion."¹

As we celebrate our freedom as a nation and as Christians, let us remember that our freedom is meant not for self-indulgence. We are free in order to love our neighbor and serve one another. Real freedom is liberty to

give oneself fully and generously to others. Meaningful freedom is found in following the law of love and being a servant to others.

In 1944 at Central Park in New York, a huge “I Am an American Day” ceremony was held. In an brief, but eloquent address, Judge Learned Hand shared these words that are so appropriate for love-abiding citizens:

“The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right;

The spirit of liberty is the spirit which sees 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 the earth unheeded;

The spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousands years ago, taught mankind the lesson it has never learned, but never quite forgotten; that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered alongside the greatest.”

May we cherish the gift of liberty given to us and to use it wisely in the spirit of love.

¹ Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), pp. 192-193.

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