

July 4, 2010
Pentecost VI, Proper 9, Year C
2 Kings 5:1-14
Galatians 6:1-16
Luke 10:1-11,16-20

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy Fourth to you. I hope that you feel sparkly and grateful to be part of this great nation, this unusual and, dare I say, exceptional people.

Today we celebrate the Continental Congress' approval of the Declaration of Independence. It asserts that the role of government is to secure what it calls self-evident rights bestowed upon us by the Creator, that's self-evident as opposed to revealed rights, rights we've discovered, the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What exactly that means, what the role of government is in securing these rights, what these rights looks like, we have never agreed. Politics is the honorable work of hashing out these differences, even if it's not always done honorably. Politics is the art of living together, and of course living together constructively, creatively, positively requires spiritual work, primarily the work of growing in our ability to love.

Some extraordinary politicians produced the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson, along with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, drafted it and set forth a new, untested vision of freedom. The American experiment has at its foundation a document that Anglicans especially can respect. For the Declaration has "contrived ambiguities, studied evasions and deliberate omissions on contested questions."¹ It intends, like the foundation of Anglicanism, to be comprehensive, to reach out and embrace, to allow for wiggle room and differences, and to unite a wide variety of people.

In 1776, the Colonists understood freedom in much different ways.²

- Adams' New England emphasized the right to belong, to participate in local governance – the Rockwellian town meeting. It sprung from Puritan suspicion of clerical hierarchy, from the history of bishops and priests limiting freedom and promoting dependence.
- In Franklin's mid-Atlantic – and especially in Quaker Pennsylvania, people emphasized freedom of conscience and the freedom to live according to one's own inner experience of God.
- In Jefferson's Virginia, plantation culture, liberty was more hierarchical in its conception: gentlemen landowners had much, yeoman farmers some, servants little, and slaves none.
- Slaves considered freedom to be emancipation.

- Settlers in the backcountry “understood [freedom] as a sovereign individual’s right to be free of government and taxes, to settle things his own way: Don’t tread on me!”
- In most of the colonies, the freedom afforded to women and Native Americans was – to put it mildly -- far less than robust, and it probably didn’t even occur to most people that this might an issue.

“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,” Whitman wrote. The Declaration had to bring together a variety of voices, united by larger principles that each could interpret with a measure of autonomy. The Founders gave us a soaring vision of freedom, and we have defined their vision more fully as well as gradually, and painfully, embodied it more fully. When we look back at our wars, the ones we feel best about, the ones we judge with most certainty were worth the blood and suffering, tend to be those that expanded liberty.

So while we have deep differences and formidable challenges today, this is nothing new, and it’s likely that today’s bitterness and division is not more strident than other eras. Surely our recent Presidential elections have not been as nasty and as savage as that of 1800 which pitted Adams and Jefferson. Today, I remain full of hope for our nation.

But while I consider myself fortunate to be an American, and thank God for it, it is not the primary or foundational characteristic of my identity or my primary allegiance. I am first a follower of Jesus Christ and a child of God, a member of his family. Jesus sent out seventy disciples, and seventy is not an arbitrary number. In Genesis, seventy is the number of nations of the earth. In the Old Testament reading, Naaman, an outsider, a foreigner, receives God’s healing care. The point: God reaches out to everyone and makes all peoples brothers and sisters in him.

God’s love and favor for Americans is no greater than his love and favor for North Koreans, Iranians, and even Taliban fighters. That’s not an argument for moral equivalency or against self-protection, but rather it repeats St. Peter’s point that God shows no partiality, that God doesn’t have favorites. (Acts 10:34) When we experience great misfortune, it is not a sign of God’s judgment upon us. Our earthly circumstances are not a measure of God’s approval or disapproval.

When Jesus and his disciples came upon a blind man, the disciples asked who had sinned, the blind man or his parents, causing this man to be blind, and Jesus said, “Neither of them did. You’re asking the wrong question and looking for someone to blame. Instead, he was born blind in order that the workings of God should be manifested and revealed in him.” (John 9:2–3) What we count as misfortune may be a way for God to bless us.

Naaman, the foreign general, is highly privileged. He feels entitled. I find him as attractive and as sympathetic as a Wall Street Master of the Universe. When Naaman went to Elisha, he expected that his wealth and position would buy him a cure. Elisha sent a messenger out to him instead of going to him personally. Naaman takes offense and fills with rage. In his fury, he becomes nationalistic and scoffs at Elisha's choice of rivers for him to bathe in -- the muddy creek, the Jordan. The rivers of his nation are better. Naaman's pride interferes with his healing. It's an obstacle to his wholeness.

Naaman wanted God as a genie, a god who prevents misfortune and caters to him, a god who doesn't change his heart. Elisha, really Elisha's God -- the Lord, disappoints Naaman, and Naaman turns away from him. God didn't act as Naaman expected. In other words, Naaman's reasoning is: "the Lord didn't heal me the way I expected, therefore he can't be trusted." Only when Naaman has a change of heart, humbles himself enough to listen to his underlings and act as they suggest, only then is he healed.

Maybe we can identify that kind of thinking sometimes happening in ourselves. If we expect God never to disappoint us, for God to protect us from tragedy and to insulate us from misfortune, to comport with our expectations, then our faith will not endure. Our faith is weak. Trust is impossible.

Jesus told the seventy that the harvest is abundant. Imagine Jesus' circumstances, his apparent insignificance in his world, way outside the power, money, and influence circles. Imagine the difficulty he faced of turning attention away from wealth and power to God and love and acceptance of one another. Imagine how people prefer the known and respectable, the established authorities, and how difficult it is to influence people to change their values and behaviors radically. Imagine the steady and intense conflict he endured. And yet, here Jesus is saying, the harvest is abundant. What evidence does he have for that? He doesn't have any, but Jesus was inclined to see abundance where others would see scarcity because he trusted in the Lord of the harvest.

Today's gospel contains a long list of Jesus' instructions to the laborers in the harvest, you and me. Be lambs among wolves -- that is, be vulnerable; carry no provisions -- that is, be open to others; salute no one along the way -- that is, don't get distracted, but stay focused on the gospel; bid peace -- that is, make your presence a blessing to other people. This is the way of Jesus, and we show our trust in him by trying to learn it, trying to embody it. It challenges the rule of power and privilege in the world.

When the seventy came back, Jesus said that he saw Satan fall like lightning. By staying focused on Jesus' mission -- caring for, blessing, encouraging other people, the disciples were accomplishing little that the world regarded as important, but something Jesus regarded to be of cosmic value, something far greater than the disciples perceived.

And yet even more important than their accomplishments, Jesus told them to rejoice that their names are written in heaven, that they are connected to eternity, that they have a relationship with God. Rejoice because regardless of your successes or failures, your future is secure. Rejoice that you have a place in God's kingdom.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ David Hackett Fischer, "One New World, Two Big Ideas," The New York Times, July 3, 2008.

² Fischer provides the first five of these bullets.