

## Fireworks, Freedom and Faith

*Galatians 5:1, 13-14*

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On Wednesday we celebrate the Fourth of July and American independence. For most of us, our day will be focusing on such important questions as, *What will we cook on the grill?* or *Where can we see some fireworks?* Some call the fourth *the celebration of summer!* Yes....but it is also our American day to celebrate and ponder the meaning of our nation's freedom.

One of the signers of *The Declaration of Independence* was John Witherspoon who was an ordained Presbyterian minister, the only clergyperson to sign the document. Witherspoon was then president of The College of New Jersey, the predecessor educational institution to Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary, where Neil and I both attended.

Of particular importance to us, as Americans and as people of faith is the idea of religious freedom. Of course, there is a strong link between the founding of our country, *The Declaration of Independence* and religious freedom. We started a revolution over the ideals of freedom and fought a revolutionary war in order to establish this freedom. Not only were we fighting to be free from a king, we were also fighting for the ideals of freedom....and religious freedom was at the top of the list.

Today we often take our religious freedom for granted, but the early leaders of the revolution who wrote our national charter (John and Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Witherspoon and fifty-one others) understood the tyranny of religious persecution and what the absence of religious tolerance meant. The early colonists were mostly European and Europe had a tortured history of persecuting those who possessed different religious beliefs. Of course,

the ones doing the persecuting were in political power. And those in political power defined what was acceptable to believe.

So today we are reminded of the history leading up to our fight for religious freedom.

Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor in 800 AD, enforced a policy of death for every person in the empire, who chose not to be baptized, (which I'm sure elevated the numbers on the baptismal rolls!)

During the Spanish Inquisition, particularly under the reign of General Tomas de Torquemada (which was in the late 1400s), one hundred thousand people were accused of heresy. Of those, ten thousand were put to death and many others spent their lives in prison.

John Hus, the Czech preacher and reformer in Prague, was excommunicated for espousing the ideas of John Wycliffe of England, who held that the laws of scripture were above those of the church. Hus was burned at the stake.

Scotsman Patrick Hamilton went to Wittenberg and studied under Martin Luther and returned proclaiming Luther's reformation ideas. Not only was he burned for his heresy, but the wood was made wet so that the fire would burn more slowly —thus prolonging his agony for six hours.

For us, the home team was the Protestants but we have to be reminded that when Protestants gained power, they returned the favor of persecution! The Reformation and the counter-Reformation involved persecution from one side to the other, and the ones with political power did the persecuting.

In the early days of the American colonies, the Maryland Assembly established the death penalty for blasphemers and people who denied the Trinity. I sure hope they didn't ask those Marylanders to explain the Trinity!

So by the time of the American Revolution, thankfully, it seems that the leaders of the revolution understood the destructive power of religious intolerance,

especially when the state aligned itself with a particular religion. And thus Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The holy author of our religion...chose not to propagate it by coercions...but to extend it by its influence on reason alone."

These ideas made it into the Bill of Rights, and the First Amendment says that our American government will not be permitted to make any "law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Which was radical in its day! No country had ever been able to pull off the separation of church and state. So as Americans, religious liberty is one of the cornerstones of our democracy. On this Fourth of July week, religious liberty is something to commemorate and celebrate. The gift from our early American ancestors was that our government would be neutral toward religion. It cannot hinder a religion. It cannot promote a particular religion. But it is an ideal that has been tested.

So after 9/11, a movement began where the spokesman proclaimed that: "Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called by God to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism."

In one of my early pastorates I got caught in a firestorm. Our church and other churches in the community sponsored and paid for a teacher to go into the local elementary schools as a Bible teacher. She would go into the classrooms to read and teach Bible stories.

A family in town complained to the school board, and when the school board did not stop the Bible program, a law suit was filed. Most expected me, as pastor of one of the supporting churches, to support the Bible program, the teacher and the school board. But I could not. Here's why:

First, I had two young school age children, my daughters Meredith and Emily were about to attend a school where the program was under way. The Bible teacher was from either a Pentecostal church or an independent Bible church and the truth was I did not want my children learning the Bible, or about God, from any

place but our church or from around our family table. “Yes, but the teacher is just reading Bible stories,” some people would counter. “What could that hurt? And think of all the children who have no church. This is the only religious instruction they receive.”

I believed, however, that just reading Bible stories was not as benign as some thought. And I knew that six, seven and eight-year-olds would ask questions of the stories and what they meant. The Bible teacher would certainly answer the questions from her own particular religious perspective. No, I believed that religious teaching was a church and family responsibility.

Second, I understood that it was unfair, and insensitive to have a Christian Bible teacher teach Jewish children and other non-Christians who were in the public schools. If we (who were in majority power) did not stand up for the minority Jews and non-Christians, who would?

And, third, the public schools, as a government institution is supposed to be neutral toward religion. That’s part of what July 4<sup>th</sup> and our celebration of freedom is about.

Of course, this issue of the separation of church and state has always been a source of tension in American society. We have often seen it in the debates surrounding prayer in the public schools. But what I have always known is that as long as there are tests, there will always be prayer in the public schools! What bothers me much more is when politicians turn matters of faith into matters for votes and use religious issues to divide people for political gain.

The price for our religious freedom is tolerance and playing fair. And what is so tricky about it all is that we have such passion for God, for our faith, and for our beliefs. It is easy for our passion to turn into intolerance with people who disagree with us.

This does not mean, that we Christians are somehow saying that what we believe about Jesus Christ as the Lord of our life and the Savior of the world is somehow

watered down. The depth of our commitment does not mean that we impede religious freedom for others who may believe very differently from you and me.

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Did you hear the scripture? Paul is writing to the young church in Galatia which is now modern day Turkey. “For freedom Christ has set us free...For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

Hear that? Paul is saying *our freedom in Christ* is linked to our love for others. Our love for others pushes us to seek freedom for people who do not have it. Love and freedom are linked. For me, the spiritual issue is — Don’t we Christians have to be concerned about freedom for others — isn’t that what love is?

Which is why, we, in the Presbyterian Church and other mainline churches reversed ourselves on the historic biblical interpretations of slavery, the civil rights of African-Americans, the equality of women and the inclusion of gay and lesbian people. In each of those discussions, scripture could be found supporting slavery, supporting the inequality of the races, supporting the subservience of women, and the condemnation of gay and lesbian people. But when those issues are examined the words of Jesus and the words from Paul where he says:

“For freedom, Christ has set us free...For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

Paul’s Galatians letter is sometimes called the *Magna Carta of the New Testament*, when he would also say: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Simon Bolivar led Peru to independence from Spain in 1824, and then the people pleaded with him to become their first president. He refused, saying that his work was the work of liberation and that others would be better suited for governance. So they honored him with a gift of one million pesos. He accepted the gift then used all of the money to purchase the freedom of nearly three thousand men and women who were still slaves to other Peruvians. He said, "It makes little sense to free a nation unless all its citizens enjoy freedom as well."

That is the gospel, isn't it? Christ was a liberator, taking away the chains that imprison us and giving us instructions to love each other as he loved us.

Our freedom as Christians is very different from what many in our culture understands as freedom. Many understand freedom as being free to do whatever you want to do... often thinking of freedom in terms of individual rights.

But as a Christian we have a different lens and a different understanding of freedom. Freedom is linked to loving our neighbor which means, freedom is linked to community and the common good. So fire up the grill this Wednesday and celebrate our freedom.

And remember: At the top of the list is our religious freedom.