

Of Faith and Freedom

Psalm 33, John 8:31-47

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Greensboro, North Carolina
July 7, 2019

This past Thursday we were privileged to celebrate the 243rd birthday of our republic on what we commonly call the Fourth of July but more accurately is designated as Independence Day, lest we forget. I hope yours was an enjoyable and memorable one. What is more, I hope and pray that 57 years from now your pastor will stand in this pulpit and recognize and give thanks to God on the occasion of our nation's 300th birthday, but to be quite candid I have my doubts which brings me to the subject of today's message. Many people glibly assume that because we have always been a free society since 1776 we will surely remain one and yet rapidly eroding before our eyes is a common understanding of the history of liberty, the source and nature of liberty and the fragile relation between our faith in God and the freedoms we enjoy. These two gifts are different, but they share a symbiotic relationship and are mutually dependent on each other. If one fails or vanishes the other will soon follow.

In *American Gospel* Jon Meacham's excellent book on the making of America and its founders he quotes Thomas Jefferson (page 31) who said: *"The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time."* Then the writer adds: *"The principles of God-given life and God-given human rights are the two wings on which the nation rose, and on which it still depends."*

One way to understand the history of America is to see it as a continuing saga of a series of liberating movements-liberation from religious persecution, liberation from outside influence, from unfair taxation, from tyranny and injustice, liberation from poverty and ignorance. Truly, America is the story of freedoms gained over the generations by religious minorities, by women, by various ethnicities and races, and by all sorts and conditions of people. That's what a review of our history reveals and even encourages.

Now what is the source of the American passion for and commitment to freedom? Many would attribute it to the views and values that emerged from the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and America, to philosophers like Rousseau, historians like Edward Gibbon, and the wisdom of our founding fathers in colonial America men like Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and others, (many of whom by the way were products of the Scottish Enlightenment and the Scottish Reformation.)

To be sure, because of the Enlightenment there emerged a renewed commitment to personal and political freedoms, to the rights of the individual, opposition to tyranny and totalitarianism, to free will and self-rule. And these principles and convictions were woven into our foundational documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And

yet I no longer believe that our citizens or our elected leaders understand or fully appreciate these historic values and their importance.

Last week our president was asked if he agreed with Vladimir Putin's recent assessment that "Western-style liberalism was now obsolete." Clearly the president didn't understand the depth or the significance of the question and hearing the word "liberalism" thought only in terms of "liberals" in a political or partisan sense and made some inane remarks about what he considered poor leadership by "liberal democrats" in San Francisco and Los Angeles. But Putin's statement was far weightier and more foundational than the president must have grasped because it is precisely "Western-style liberalism" which came out of the Enlightenment that gave shape and substance to the fashioning of America and other democratic societies. I think we need to go back and take a remedial course in civics and Western civilization and be reminded of precisely what is the DNA of America and of democracy and of our freedoms so sacrificially won. Tuesday's edition of the News and Record told of an upcoming exhibition from the Smithsonian that will be at the Greensboro Historical Museum starting in December. Called "American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith" it will examine some of the debates that have shaped political participation and dissent over two centuries and attendance at our former church might be a great first step for all of us.

But still more than an understanding of our history is needed if we are to protect and preserve our inherited liberties. The source of our blessings and benefits goes well beyond the Enlightenment and has its foundation and source in Almighty God, the God our founding fathers referred to in our foundational documents in a non-sectarian way as "Nature's God" or the "Creator."

As a citizen and especially as a person of faith, I worry about the precarious state of our freedoms and our democracy not alone because of a lack of knowledge of history, philosophy and civics but because of a waning absence of the knowledge of God in this land. In recent weeks I have shared with you some sobering statistics about the declining numbers of members in congregations across America and the diminishing influence of and respect for Judeo-Christian values in this contentious age and in our divided nation. The demise of religion, the growing secularization of American culture, the abandoning of church and synagogue by younger generations does not bode well for the future of freedom and democracy.

At the unifying General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches meeting in June of 2010, it was stated that the greatest challenges facing the church in the decades to come were two-fold:

1. The growing secularization of society, and
2. The marginalization of the church.

Those who formed and founded this nation from the earliest days recognized as many of us do not, that liberty was dependent on two things provided by sound religion: truth and duty.

Truth: One day Jesus said to skeptics: “If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Freedom was conditional upon the preservation of truth. Some might suggest that what Jesus had in mind here was only spiritual freedom and not political or national liberty, but I contend that the two are intimately related. And even though democracy as we know it was foreign to the world of our Lord, it had its birth and derives its strength from Judeo-Christian values.

And friends, if we don’t realize that a commitment to speaking the truth is essential for our freedom and that it is in jeopardy in our day then we have our heads in the sand. I marvel that in a relatively short time we seem as a culture to have jettisoned a commitment to telling the truth and holding persons and institutions accountable for the truth and now speak in non-sensible terms of “alternative facts,” of which there is no such thing. People have a right to their understanding or interpretation of the facts but not to the accuracy of facts themselves. Two years ago, *Time Magazine* had an ominous cover story asking in bold red on black “Is Truth Dead?” Similarly, in a former edition in 1966 the question on the cover was “Is God Dead?” I have my opinion and you have yours, but if either is true, that is to say, if either belief in the truth or belief in God is dead the other is destined for the same fate in a free society.

This is why it is crucial that people of faith that churches and synagogues and houses of worship among honorable religious bodies, insist on preserving, protecting and speaking the truth as they understand it. And this applies equally to all segments of a free society.

Josiah Gilbert Holland in the 19th century was a poet, educator, and also a member of the church, and served in Vicksburg, MS when he served as Superintendent of Education. He later became the editor of *Scribner’s Magazine* and is known for a poem he wrote which may be more relevant to our age than even his own. Despite the non-inclusive language of that day he penned these inspiring words:

“God, give us men!”

God, give us men! A time like this demands
 Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands;
 Men whom the lust of office does not kill;
 Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;
 Men who possess opinions and a will;
 Men who have honor; men who will not lie;
 Men who can stand before a demagogue
 And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking!
 Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog
 In public duty, and in private thinking;
 For while the rabble, with their thumb-worn creeds,
 Their large professions and their little deeds,
 Mingle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps,
 Wrong rules the land and waiting Justice sleeps.

-Josiah Gilbert Holland

And what can we say of the necessity of duty in a free society? Lord Acton, called “The Magistrate of History,” who made the history of liberty his life’s work in the nineteenth century put it this way: “No country can be free without religion. It creates and strengthens the notion of duty. If men are not kept straight by duty, they must be by fear. The more they are kept by fear, the less they are free. The greater the strength of duty, the greater the liberty.” Surely you recognize that it is increasingly difficult to talk to contemporary Americans, especially younger Americans, about their duties---civic duties, political duties, military duties, social duties and especially spiritual duties. We assume today that duties are a denial of our liberties, a restriction of our freedoms, but our liberties rest upon these duties.

For some three centuries now, Americans have cherished a belief, inspired by our religious heritage and written into our foundational documents that good government and sound religion are separate spheres but mutually dependent. In John Meacham’s wonderful book, cited earlier, on the making of this nation, he speaks of Thomas Jefferson’s insistence upon a “wall” between church and state but argues that this wall was designed to separate the church from the state and not to separate religion from politics. Of course, sound religious values and views should influence our political and national life, but not the views of any particular sect or religion.

Speaking in Baltimore several years ago Pope John Paul II urged people of faith to heed America’s founding fathers and bring their religious convictions to bear on their political life. He said: “Democracy needs virtue, if it is not to turn against everything it is meant to defend and encourage...democracy stands or falls with the truths and values it embodies and promotes.”

You see, what we dare not forget is that freedom was God’s idea before it was man’s. The source of liberty goes well beyond the Enlightenment. From the very beginning, from Eden on if you will, our connection to the Creator has not been a chain or a cage, but a willing bond of love and gratitude. The relationship between the Creator and the creature was characterized by freedom and based on trust. Adam was free to obey or disobey God, but he was not free to escape the consequences of his decision. This arrangement entailed tremendous risk on the Lord’s part, because the risk of freedom is the bondage of sin. If we are truly free, then we are free also to become enslaved. And yet, it is not God who enslaves us. Rather, when we freely choose to violate the will and the ways of God and to discard the truths of God for the opinions of man we will discover new, or rediscover old forms of bondage.

Everybody, after all, serves somebody and if it is not the living God that we serve then we will serve a God of our own making and design. And yet, if we do serve the living God, then we should not be afraid to challenge or confront the lesser gods that vie for our allegiance and threaten our liberty.

At its best American has cherished a belief in freedom for all people and this belief arises from our spiritual heritage. Freedom is a foundational truth that originates not with constitution, not the abstract philosophical notions, but with the faith that founded and fuels this free republic. In 1789, the year our constitution was ratified by the states, the second

president of the United States, John Adams, wrote: "Our constitution was designed for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other." Now some might challenge that statement, and many do today, but there remain many of us who hold to it still. And that is precisely why I am so concerned about freedom's future in this country. If we choose to abandon the ethical, moral, and spiritual principles that brought about our existence, and if these are not reflected in our policies and principles then our liberties as a people will eventually be lost.

So, what I am suggesting for your consideration is that the demise of religion portends the end of liberty because freedom requires and rests upon truth, truth that is above and beyond pronouncements of the state or the opinions of the public, even a majority of them. Truth is not determined by popular vote or reliable polls. Truth is not the product of executive, legislative or judicial branch of government. The truth that free people must know and cherish is God's truth--God's truth about the nature and destiny of human beings, God's truth about good and evil, God truth about right and wrong. And God's truth is above and beyond all human truth conceived by men or nations. You see, the law does not determine what is true and just. Rather, the law is only a reflection of the people's conception of what is true and just as they are given to understand them. And so, the law must have a moral and spiritual base beyond itself. And you can be certain that if the general public no longer can discern good from evil, or right from wrong, then the people's laws will eventually follow suit.

Now I am sure that for people like us who are here today liberty has lost none of its appeal. We cherish it still and continue to sing its praises. But I wonder if you would agree with me that liberty's base and its foundation are rapidly eroding. If this is true, then shouldn't this be a cause of great concern? Increasingly, we find ourselves living in an age where the very foundation stones of freedom are being undermined and are washing away. Truth has no objective base and is considered just a matter of opinion. Morality and ethics are little more than personal choice or preference and any notion of duty is considered today a violation of one's personal freedom, despite the fact that apart from personal responsibility and duty there is no freedom.

The psalmist declares: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." American has been a blessed nation, to be sure, and historically have had a passionate commitment to the Lord of history. If it is our desire to see our children and grandchildren enjoy the liberties and blessings which we have known and to which we have become accustomed, then we must help them and one another never to forget as our next hymn will remind us that the light of freedom has a "Holy Light" and that God alone is the "Author of Liberty" and that the future of freedom in this and all countries is directly related to the firmness of our faith in and allegiance to our creator God.

Let us pray:

God bless our native land;
Firm may she ever stand
Through storm and night:
When the wild tempests rave,
Ruler of wind and wave,
Do Thou our country save
By Thy great might.

For her our prayer shall rise
To God above the skies;
On Him we wait;
Thou who art ever nigh,
Guarding with watchful eye,
To Thee aloud we cry,
God save the State!

Not for this land along,
But be God's mercies shown
From shore to shore;
And may the nations see
That men should brothers be,
And form one family
The wide world o'er. Amen.