

“True Freedom”
A sermon for the Fifth Sunday After Pentecost (July 1, 2007)
Delivered at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Pasadena, CA

Lectionary Readings: [Year C, Proper 8](#)

Just last week we baptized baby Ryan and we read where the Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians that there is only one baptism and that for those who are baptized into Christ there is no longer any Jew or Greek.¹

Today, brothers and sisters, it is my duty to remind you that in Christ there is no longer any Englishman or American. There is no longer any Pasadenan or Costa Rican, no African or European. In Christ we are all One. There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all.² In Christ we are a new creation,³ we are born again into the kingdom of God.⁴

Yes, the *kingdom* of God. You have heard it said that America is a Christian nation. But in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus says that if we are to follow him we will have no place to lay our heads.⁵ We will have no home in this world, because Christ has no home in this world. Jesus’s disciple Peter learned this lesson well, and he later wrote that we are aliens and strangers in this land.⁶

At his trial, Jesus told Pontius Pilate that God’s kingdom is not of this world.⁷ So where is it? Earlier Jesus had said the kingdom of heaven is within you.⁸ And not just within *you* as an individual. An alternate translation of that verse is “among you”. The kingdom of heaven is *among* you – among *us* – as a community gathered to follow Jesus as his Church.

The Greek word we translate as “church” is *ekklesia*. It literally means “called out”. We are called out of America to become a new people set aside for God’s own purposes. The Apostle Peter said we “are a chosen race,

¹ Galatians 3:27-28

² Ephesians 4:5-6

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17; cf. Galatians 6:15

⁴ John 3:3

⁵ Luke 9:57-58

⁶ 1 Peter 2:11

⁷ John 18:36

⁸ Luke 17:21

a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."⁹ He's not talking about America. He's talking about the Church.

In a few minutes we will proclaim our faith in the King of Kings.¹⁰ Using the words of the Nicene Creed we will say "We believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ." Brothers and sisters, there is only *one* Lord. And if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not. If Jesus is Lord, then George W. Bush is not. If Jesus is Lord, then neither Barack Obama nor Hilary Clinton can hope to win any election that truly matters next year. They've already lost. The powers of this world were defeated at the Cross of Christ. *Our God reigns!*¹¹ Amen?

Therefore we come before this Table today to announce the victory of God, to make our true Declaration of Independence: independence from the world and dependence on God, independence from American individualism and dependence on one another as God's body on earth.

When we gather to eat the body of Christ, we become the body of Christ. We become the dwelling place of Christ on earth. As we said in our Collect for the Day, we become God's "temple".¹² God is with us and we are his kingdom. Every time God's will is done on earth, *that* is God's kingdom come.¹³ When God dwells with us through Christ Our Emmanuel,¹⁴ we are God's kingdom. Today. *Now*. Christ is already King. Glory be to God!

There is still work to be done, of course. God's will is not done perfectly. It's not even done perfectly within our own community. There are still divisions: divisions between us and God and divisions between ourselves and others. But when Christ comes again, and when his Kingdom is revealed in all its glory, it will not be something new but something more of the same. The new has already begun. The kingdom came at Pentecost.

Today is the Fifth Sunday *after* Independence Day!

⁹ 1 Peter 2:9

¹⁰ Revelation 17:14

¹¹ Revelation 19:6

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:9; cf. 1 Peter 2:5

¹³ Matthew 6:10

¹⁴ Matthew 1:23

When we were baptized in the Spirit at Pentecost and the Church was born, we became a new people. Called out from every nation, tribe, language, and people, we left our old identities behind and became God's People.¹⁵

So what does this mean? Does this mean that we can't be involved in secular politics? If our true citizenship is in heaven¹⁶ (in other words, if our true citizenship is in this place, gathered around that Table), then does that mean we shouldn't vote? Of course not. Does this mean that we cannot celebrate our heritage as African Americans (or Scotch-Irish Americans as the case may be)? Of course not. Our identity as Christians does not completely remove us from the world. We are in the world, we just are not of the world.

We do have a heritage on our mother's side, whether our mother is Israel, Rome, or America. But our true inheritance comes from our Father in heaven.¹⁷ As our Psalm for today says, it is in God that we have a "goodly heritage".¹⁸

Our ultimate allegiance is not to the flag of the United States of America. Our allegiance is to the Cross of Christ. Hopefully the two cultures will not conflict. In most circumstances we will be able to render unto America the things that are America's while still rendering unto God the things that are God's.¹⁹

But sometimes the kingdom of Christ does conflict with the kingdom of the world. And in that case our choice is clear. No one can serve two masters.²⁰ And when we count the cost²¹ we come to see that Christ is the pearl of great price whose beauty outshines all others.²² Nothing we desire can compare to him.²³

¹⁵ Revelation 14:6

¹⁶ Philippians 3:20

¹⁷ Romans 8:17

¹⁸ Psalm 16:6

¹⁹ Matthew 22:21

²⁰ Matthew 6:24

²¹ Luke 14:28

²² Matthew 13:46

²³ Proverbs 8:11

In our Epistle reading from Galatians today we find one place where the values of the Kingdom conflict with the values of the World. This week our American neighbors celebrate their high holy day. On the Fourth of July Americans celebrate what they call their “freedom”.

But the word “freedom” means something very different for us as People of God than it does for Americans. When Americans talk about freedom they mean *the ability to do what they want to do*. Independence Day is the celebration of freedom from the King of England, freedom to decide for ourselves what to do and not to have laws imposed on us by a foreign power. It is a celebration of freedom as Self-Determination.

But it is this idea of freedom – freedom as self-determination – that seduces us into forsaking God. We don’t like to be told what to do. We want to decide for ourselves what to do. We want to perform what Paul calls “the works of the flesh”, things like “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy”, gossip, worry, complaining, and so on.²⁴ And when God tells us we can’t do these things, we feel resentful. We feel as if he is taking away our freedom.

But that’s because we don’t have a Christian understanding of freedom. We have an American understanding of freedom. We think freedom means doing whatever we want.

Therefore, in the name of Jesus Christ I challenge you to *repent* for the kingdom of heaven has come near!²⁵ The Greek word we translate as “repent” is *metanoia*. It literally means to re-think or to change your mind. We must change our minds, no longer being conformed to the world’s way of thinking, but being transformed by God’s way of thinking.²⁶

We must learn to see that the works of self-determining flesh are slavery but we were called instead to a life of Spirit-empowered freedom.²⁷ We must learn to see that when God tells us to do what he wants instead of what we want, he has our best interests in mind.

²⁴ Galatians 5:19-21

²⁵ Matthew 4:17

²⁶ Romans 12:2

²⁷ Galatians 5:13ff

God wants us to be happy. It is simply confusion to think that the pursuit of happiness requires “liberty” and “independence”. If we want to be independent from God, we can’t possibly be happy. That’s because God wants us to be happy, so the only way we can choose our own will over God’s will is to choose unhappiness over happiness.

As C.S. Lewis put it “the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.” Lewis writes that hell is where the damned “enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitted to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.”²⁸

True freedom is not self-determination and the ability to do what you want. True freedom is slavery to Christ. Paul lists the “fruit of the spirit” as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”²⁹ These are wonderful things that we would all like to do. But it is not as easy as it sounds! The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.³⁰

The only way we can actually do these things is to “crucify our flesh”³¹ – to put our own desires to death so that it is no longer ourselves that live but Christ who lives in us.³² We must become slaves to Christ.³³ Then we will be free from selfishness, worry, anger, resentment. We will be free to be happy. That is *true* freedom.

It’s not the American way. But it is the way of the Cross. It’s not the kind of freedom that can be won by violence, revolution, and war. Self-determination can be won by violence. In fact, self-determination can only be won by violence because for me to do what I want I have to prevent others from doing what they want. But, brothers and sisters, that is not true freedom. True freedom can only be won by self-sacrifice, by forsaking the American way for the way of the Cross.

²⁸ *The Problem of Pain*, p. 130.

²⁹ Galatians 5:22-23

³⁰ Matthew 26:41.

³¹ Galatians 5:24

³² Galatians 2:20

³³ 1 Corinthians 7:22

But if we do choose to follow Christ and to walk in the way of the Cross we, like Christ himself, will have nowhere to lay our heads. We will be called out of our identities as Americans and we will become strangers and aliens in the world. And yet – and *yet!* – we will also be dwelling in Christ and the power of his kingdom. And by God’s grace we will discover that the way of the Cross is none other than the way of life and peace.

In the name of the Almighty King: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.