

## Sermon July 3, 2022

### Independence Day

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?

The USA celebrates its independence tomorrow. We are a nation of peoples from every family, language, tribe, and nation. Most Americans were not the original inhabitants of this land. They were strangers. Some of our ancestors came seeking freedom from oppression, and some came as slaves. Others are descendants of those who were already here.

It helps to remember today that how you or your ancestors came here has a great deal to do with how you celebrate the day. And the Declaration of Independence did not mean a lot to people who were Native Americans, or to people enslaved with no freedoms.

The Scriptures, particularly Deuteronomy and Hebrews, remind us of the place of the stranger. “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Recent immigration issues have challenged us in our country. Legislation has sought to control if not eliminate immigration, and fear of foreigners is not an unusual event. We are conflicted about this as a nation.

Hebrews calls us to remember that we are all sojourners, dwellers in a land that is God’s, and we tarry here for a time, but we are not permanent residents.

Many people of all political persuasions will use language this weekend to remind us that our freedom is never perfected until all humanity is truly free. As long as there are people in bondage, as long as there are widows and orphans who are oppressed, as long as there are immigrants not welcomed, and women and men without jobs, as long as children die of hunger, we are not truly free.

We tend to blame our imperfect freedom on others, instead of accepting responsibility for increasing it. Matthew’s gospel addresses this issue. Jesus reminds us to Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Loving our enemies has everything to do with our total freedom. As long as we hate, as long as we scapegoat, as long as we fear and despise those who differ from us, even hate us, we cannot truly be free.

And I think we all know how hard it is to love our enemies—especially in these days of turmoil on multiple fronts. As a church, our political and social leanings should not be the thing that unites us, otherwise we can get caught up in the heresy of thinking Jesus is lucky to have us on his side.

It really is all about grace—a table where all are welcomed and affirmed. When it’s anything else we aren’t really being the church.

This Independence Day is a day to celebrate the riches of freedom we have, and to give thanks for those who have made it possible. It is also a day to consider how we might increase our freedom by liberating others who are less free than ourselves.

It is a day to remember that many of us were also once strangers, and that our hope comes not from the things we have been able to do for ourselves, but from the God who sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

When we welcome the stranger—even those who are different from us-- we show hospitality to nothing less than God, who gives us our true freedom.

The Founders of the United States didn’t just want to be free from foreign rule, they also aspired to create a new way of being in community. They wanted to build somewhere that was more equitable and safeguarded against anyone getting too much power and influence.

If we close our doors to the stranger, then it’s a short step to closing our hearts and our minds to them, also. Jesus warns us of that kind of living in today’s gospel reading. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” It also suggests that a culture of individualism and self-reliance can, when left unchecked, turn into a mistrust of others.

Being dependent on others is not always sign of weakness or of compromise; it can be a sign of strength. It is the ultimate sign that we trust another person, and it recognizes that we are, in fact, the Body of Christ, where we need everyone, with their gifts – and idiosyncrasies – in order to be complete.

So, on this Independence Day, let’s also think of it as “Interdependence Day”;---- a day when we celebrate not only being free from unjust rule but also a day when we commit ourselves anew to extending liberty and justice for all

Amen