

7-5-20 Sermon "Interdependence Day!"

The story is told of a young boy, 3 or 4 years old, whose parents have another child. The parents bring the new baby girl home and place her in the crib in the nursery, and the older boy asks to be left alone with his new sister. Wondering what this is about, the parents reluctantly agree, knowing that they have a baby monitor in the room and will be able to hear whatever is going on.

Well, the older brother goes into the baby's room, shutting the door quietly behind him, and walks over to the edge of the crib. Watching the baby for a time, he finally leans in and whispers to his baby sister, "Quick, tell me about God, I'm starting to forget."

On July 4th, Independence Day, a national holiday but certainly not a religious holiday, we celebrate the independence that our nation gained as a result of The American Revolution, the war of independence fought against Great Britain beginning in 1776. But 244 years later, on Independence Day, when we celebrate our "independence," what is it exactly that we're celebrating?

I want to explore this with you, and in doing so I am borrowing from a lecture given in 2009 by Dr. Yvonne Zimmerman, a professor of Christian Ethics at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, the Methodist Seminary in Delaware where I earned my Masters of Divinity Degree, and combining some of her thoughts at that time with some of my own that have developed over the years as well. I reread this lecture every so often to stir my memory because, as the child in the opening story said, "I'm starting to forget."

Dr. Zimmerman suggests that "some of the notions that are often linked to 'independence' include total autonomy (from other nations, maybe even from other people); self-governed self-sufficiency; complete freedom." And she goes on to posit that "the irony is that as a nation we are deeply *de*-pendent at virtually every turn! [Dependent] on:

- immigrant labor (many of whom are undocumented)
- on outsourced jobs, for both goods and services;
- on global conflicts and for our own war-machine economy, as well as for our own national unity. Under the banner of fear -

of a perpetually elevated “terror level” we are united as one, and declared to be “free.” Now, eleven years later I’m not sure I would say we are “united as one,” but I get her point.

Now, we decry some of these things and proclaim that we need walls, and immigration bans and the like, yet farmers can’t get the workforce they need with just native born workers, neither can construction companies, roofing companies, landscape companies, or even restaurants. The immigrant workers are the only ones willing to do many of those difficult, manual labor jobs.

Likewise, we complain when companies outsource jobs to other countries while at the same time we insist on low priced goods from the Walmarts, Targets, Meijer’s, Costco’s and other stores who are only able to provide low-cost goods because they import so much of their product line from factories in other countries where wages are lower.

So, on many of these issues, we’re actually talking out of both sides of our mouths, and sometimes, neither side really knows what it’s talking about. And so we often give in to a politics of otherness, and of fear. And as Zimmerman points out, alluding to

scripture in 1 John 4:18, "if perfect love casts out all fear, then perfect fear casts out all love."

And these are not new ideas. I've suggested to you before that we are not as independent as we would like to think we are, that none of us has ever actually pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps as it were, completely independent of one another.

For example, most if not all of us attended public schools at one time or another, primary or secondary, all of which are funded by our combined tax revenues at the local, state, and federal levels, perhaps using scholarships provided by donors or student loans made by the government. All of us came to church this morning on roads or sidewalks paid for by our combined tax dollars - we didn't build any of them. We depend on government provided fire and police services paid for by tax revenues generated by the community. We worship in a building that was funded, no doubt, by a combination of private donations made by many people and loans from financial institutions using the deposits of others, and was built by a group of skilled workers

upon whose gifts and knowledge we are dependent. And we could go on.

As Dr. Zimmerman's work and these examples clearly point out, our "independence," as it were, is an illusion - we have always needed one another. There has never been a time, nor will there ever be a time, when we are not dependent upon one another. In fact, our war of Independence against Great Britain in the 18th century was only successful because of the assistance we received from France.

In the theology of the United Methodist Church we call this interdependence Connectionalism. We are connected to one another, within a congregation, within districts, and conferences, and jurisdictions, and as a denomination - we are dependent upon one another in order to be the church that Christ calls us to be. Even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was dependent upon God, upon the Holy Spirit, and upon the 12 disciples that he called to be in ministry with him. HE knew that even the Son of God couldn't go it alone!

But it's as though once we step outside these walls, or if we are already outside these wall, "connectionalism" or "dependence" is suddenly something to be feared, to be looked down upon, as we lift up the ongoing myth - even theology - of our independence. As Americans we like to think of our nation as a Christian nation - another myth for another day - yet Christianity is a faith that is founded upon the notion of community working together and caring for one another. Again to quote Zimmerman, "Independence is not a Christian virtue or value."

And she goes on "It may be an American value to go it alone; to pull yourself up by your bootstraps; to admire the self-made man and the self-made woman - and believe that God helps those who help themselves. But never let us confuse these **American** values with **Christian** values; with Jesus' counsel to give generously to those who ask, or with the [church] practice of bearing one another's burdens."

This idea of independence is not only not a Christian value, it is, in fact, contradictory to the teachings of Jesus Christ, as shown in many places in the gospels, most notably the Good Samaritan

story in Luke. So, as Christians - that is, as followers of Jesus Christ - we should never, never be confused about which set of values we are called to place first.

Let's be even more clear about what the "declaration of our independence" meant when it came to writing the U.S. Constitution. The "strict-constructionist" point of view - the constitutionalist version of being a biblical literalist - says that we should not add onto or interpret the Constitution in any way other than exactly as it is written, exactly as the words in the document were first intended or interpreted. While that's not how I would approach it, Zimmerman suggests that, "Not only is the notion of independence a ruse, but Independence Day itself represents an enormous historical misnomer." And by that she means that the "independence" that we celebrate was not a "universal independence for all Americans, but rather only applied to a "select class of Americans" - that is, adult, white, property-owning men.

So, for all of you women in the congregation - sorry, you didn't win **YOUR** independence that day. Women of any race or

ethnicity, native Americans who had been "independent" in this nation for centuries until white colonists arrived, African-Americans brought here as slaves, even white men who weren't wealthy enough to own property - NEED NOT APPLY. No independence for you! So, surprise, surprise, only a select handful of wealthy white men gained their "independence." For everyone else it was "same stuff, different day." You see, "Independence Day has very different meanings for different people and groups in the U.S. - American culture."

What independence looked like, or should I say, looks like, is different for different people. 18th century ideas of independence and freedom were much more restrictive than what we like to think is the case today, but in all honesty, freedom moves at a snail-like pace throughout the course of history. Freedom for African-Americans is still evolving barely 160 years after emancipation during the Civil War and 50+ years after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Freedom for Women **seems** to be on more equal footing, until you actually dig into it and find that women are still not given equal pay for equal work and that

our white-male-dominated legislatures at all levels of governance refuse to correct that deficiency. Freedom for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters is only now beginning to gain some traction, and is notably being resisted most vehemently, primarily by Christians.

So what are we to do? Well, Zimmerman suggests that one option, one way to work around these fallacious notions of our “independence” would be to “enact a more truthful celebration...to celebrate ‘Interdependence Day.’” “Interdependence Day,” she suggests first of all, “would **acknowledge** the ways in which we are dependent.”

This would require some work on our part though, because our culture doesn’t want us to either see or admit our dependency on others. But Zimmerman suggests that among other things we could do is that we could make a point to know, for example, who has grown and prepared the food that we eat today. Where did it come from BEFORE it reached the supermarket shelves? Did we get this food from a Farmer’s Market, was it grown locally or

flown in from another country? Was it grown in some large corporate farm, or by a small family farmer? So, asking the question of 'where did our food come from?' acknowledges our interdependence upon others who grow food for us. Likewise, asking the question of 'where did the clothes I'm wearing come from?' Did you make them, or did you buy them in a store? Where were they manufactured? China? Nicaragua? Pakistan? Were the people who made them paid a living wage or are they in effect, slave labor? Am I supporting slave labor practices based on where I buy and how much I'm willing to pay for my clothing? These are questions that, if asked and understood, can help us to understand how dependent we are on one another, whether we want to be or not.

A little more personally, "who are the people who support and nurture us emotionally, making it possible for us to do what we do, while retaining some level of sanity and good humor? I am totally dependent on Lynn for that support. I have other friends who provide some of that as well but, for better or for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, the one on whom I

am most dependent is my wife, Lynn. Who is that for you? A spouse, a partner, a child, a parent, a sibling or relative, a friend, a paid caregiver? Is it more than one person? Do you recognize that you are dependent in that way? Can you own that?

And lastly, who made our worship today possible? Who prepared our space for recording? Who did the recording and the editing? But digging more deeply, who is instrumental in creating the device on which you're watching this? Or producing the electricity that powers it? Do you know? Do you know their names? Do you know what else they had to deal with this week but still did this for you? Can we acknowledge how dependent we are on them?

In all of these examples, Zimmerman suggests that another way to think about it is, "on whose backs, both willing and unwilling, do we stand?"

Secondly, "in honoring 'Inter-dependence Day' we would celebrate the ways in which this dependency takes place." That is, we would finally realize the **myth** of the self-made man and the self-made woman, and own the fact that none of us are in

fact, self-made, we are all dependent, and that in fact “to live as a member of the body of Christ” is to understand that none of us are self-made.

And thirdly and lastly, “in celebrating ‘Inter-dependence Day’ we might be more open and thoughtful about the nature of the relationships that we’re seeking so that we might be more mindful that “dependency and connection - inter-connection - need not entail domination and exploitation” of others.

So, it’s okay if we celebrate our “Independence” from the standpoint of having won a war 250 years ago that allowed us to form a nation apart from Great Britain. And it’s okay if we’re proud of our national heritage, so long as we remember that if we claim to be Christian then our faith claim **must** take priority **every time** in order to be true.

The first of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt have NO other gods before me,” certainly applies here - we are called to be Christians first, Americans second. And Jesus’ answer to the

question, "Which is the greatest commandment?" "To love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, and ALL your mind, and ALL your strength..." not **some** of it but ALL of it, "...and to love your neighbor as your self," leaves little room for interpretation for followers of Christ.

In his state of the union address in January of 1941, 11 months **before** the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt laid out for Congress and for the nation a vision.

He said, *"In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.*

The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

These first two, as you know, are enshrined in our Constitution.

The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to

*every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants-
everywhere in the world.*

*The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into
world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such
a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a
position to commit an act of physical aggression against any
neighbor—anywhere in the world.*

These second two, freedom from want and freedom from fear, I
would suggest, are not at all about any notion of “independence”
but are totally “interdependent” ideas - things that will only
happen in cooperation and connectedness with others.

*“That is no vision of a distant millennium,” Roosevelt
concluded. “It is a definite basis for a kind of world
attainable in our own time and generation.”*

This inter-dependence of which Roosevelt spoke as containing
these four freedoms, sounds an awful lot like Jesus’ vision of the
Kin-dom of God described in the Sermon on the Mount and
elsewhere in the Gospels, and of the new heaven and new earth
from Revelation. And neither of those Christian teachings

advocates any notion of our independence, rather they teach of our inter-dependence upon one another, and even more so, upon the God who created each of us.

So I'll conclude by both quoting and paraphrasing Dr. Zimmerman. She asks, speaking of and to pastors, preachers, seminarians and professors, but I would include all who call on the name of Jesus Christ, "Are we still of any use? Where is the prophetic vision? In staying with the unsettledness of this question, let us assess our potential usefulness not by the fervor of our patriotism, but instead by our faithfulness to the Christ who we are learning to more fully and more truthfully confess. And by living prophetically into the unfolding vision of God." And to her words I would simply add this prayer, *God remind us of what your kin-dom looks like, because we're starting to forget. Amen.*