



Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“The Purpose of Freedom”
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
July 1, 2007

*For freedom Christ has set us free;
stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
Galatians 5:1*

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 (pew Bible, NT 146)

Prayer:

God of comfort and hope, God of surprise and challenge, as we come to this point in our worship, we look for a word from you. Speak to us, we pray, the word we need to hear, and then give us the grace to respond as your faithful people. In Christ's name. Amen.

Peter Gomes, Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University, some years back was in London visiting English friends. On July 4th, a Monday, Gomes was on his unwilling way to the airport in a taxi, when as they passed Green Park he heard one of those big brassy British military bands playing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

What a strange sound to hear in London! Then he realized what day it was, and he said with some excitement to the taximan, “Why, it’s the Fourth of July!”

The cabbie replied with *accurate disinterest*, “That’s right, mate; yesterday was the third and tomorrow’s the fifth.”

For us Americans the Fourth of July is a big deal, a huge deal. It’s one of our favorite holidays and the beginning of summer, and we celebrate it with flags and bunting, parades and speeches, family gatherings, and food burned to a crisp on an outside grill. We listen to band music and we close the day out with a display of fireworks as large as

our municipal budgets will allow...often with the 1812 Overture coming as the climax of the day with the last burst of fireworks.

I was surprised to hear recently that the 1812 Overture originally was written to celebrate Russia's victory over the French in 1812. I'm not sure I understand why we should use a Russian celebration of an 1812 victory over our late French allies, unless it's simply the fact that we Americans like a rousing good fanfare –bells, cannon, and drums, and the like. There's at least one tune in the 1812 Overture we can all hum, and often it's coordinated with/set to fireworks. So we like it – a rock show with artillery!

This cynicism aside, let me say how much I enjoyed the Strawberry Festival here at the church Friday night. What a wonderful expression of Christian hospitality it was to the larger Poland community. How I enjoyed the parade out front, and then the fireworks, which I understand were even better than last year's. It was all a delightful slice of "Americana."

There is more of course to the Fourth of July and the celebrating of citizenship than outdoor festivals and feasting and noise – at least there ought to be. Citizens who take both their country and their faith seriously should be encouraged to think about the purpose of freedom.

Justice Thurgood Marshall of the Supreme Court once uttered an unutterable heresy, -- namely, that the Constitution of the United States was a flawed document at its inception because it accepted the universal and unacceptable reality of slavery, thus postponing what it would take much blood and many years to address if not resolve. That makes us stop and think.

Hearing Justice Marshall's comments, critics said he was running down the founding fathers, when his main point was that the virtues of the Constitution were imposed upon it by the ever-increasing conscience of the nation. That is, the founders have their important place, but it is the *people* who deserve the real credit for the ingenuity of the Constitution; it is time passing and present, not times past that need to be celebrated in this enterprise.

Mr. Justice Marshall reminded us that freedom is not some abstract 18th century idea enshrined on vellum and worshiped in the National Archives. It is something we have to continually work at. It is not a once-and-for-all enterprise. It is the constant renewal, reformation, and extension of freedom carried out by many people over many years under many circumstances that is really to be celebrated and contemplated.

Under the federal Constitution, (as it was originally drafted) the ancestors of our African-American friends had no votes, no legal rights that white people were required to acknowledge, and for purely political purposes they were counted as three-fifths of a white person for the benefit of economical and political interests. Women had a higher station but no more legal rights.

And of course the point is not to criticize the founders for not living by our more enlightened standards; it is simply to acknowledge that freedom is a slowly evolving process, not always discernible and not always achievable but always to be pursued, always to be cherished and celebrated when found, and always to be used for its ultimate purpose, its ultimate ends.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the text we read a moment ago from Galatians was a popular one for patriotic preachers around the Fourth of July. The freedom they had in mind was always tangible and was achieved by America's late-won Revolution. It was freedom from the alleged tyranny of King George III.

Saint Paul, in our reading from the Letter of Galatians this morning, however, was not anticipating the American Revolution or the Republic that emerged from it. Paul was far more of a revolutionary than George Washington or John Adams or any of that lot. He was far more revolutionary than our cautious pragmatic founding fathers back in Philadelphia two hundred years ago. Saint Paul was interested in a real revolution, a substantial revolution. He was interested in real freedom to pursue the reality of the Kingdom of God, a place ruled by the fruits of the spirit, which could be achieved only by the constant exercise of the gifts of the spirit.

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Paul gives us an invitation, which is also a warning. Walk by the spirit, he warns, in the midst of the most materialistic nation that had yet existed. Walk by the spirit, he warns, don't be like your grumbling, groaning, murmuring ancestors in the wilderness, complaining about what God has done for them, and expecting him to do more every day and every hour; and complaining against each other, blaming each other, biting and sniping at each other. Take responsibility for your freedom to pursue that toward which freedom leads:

fellowship with self,
fellowship with God,
fellowship with neighbor
– against which there is no law.

That is the divine injunction to us, and it's on the basis, the authority, of that invitation that we indeed can become better citizens in this earthly Republic, and in the world in this age of increasing globalization.. *“For you are called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, be servants of one another.”*

How are we to do this?
By living in the spirit, Paul says.

How does one do that?
By showing the fruits of the spirit.

What are they?

Many of you memorized them at some point: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control --- all those virtues that surround us on every hand by which our families, our schools, our communities, our corporations, and our nations have been governed for so long, --- forgive a bit of irony.

Against such as these, says Saint Paul, there is no law. None of these are forbidden, none of these are fattening, none of these are illegal.

Maybe that's just the problem; we take them for granted when they're present, and we take them for granted even when they're not, even they are not in evidence. Maybe if Paul had said, "The following are absolutely forbidden on pain of death: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*; ---maybe then we'd sit up and take notice.

The fruits of the spirit, like the virtues of our federal Constitution, or the sanctity of our marriage vows, or the holiness of our baptismal vows, -- don't describe us or things as they *are*. They describe an end, a purpose, a destination, an ideal that has been won for us by the grace of God and the blood of those before us -- which is not yet ours to possess, or to take lightly.

In a moment you will see the flag raised, and hear the Battle Hymn of the Republic played and a story about freedom read. We will honor too those who have served our country.

In so doing we remember that freedom's purpose is to enable us to pursue that which God desires for us and which we, in our heart of hearts, desire for ourselves.

Fellowship,
Respect for self,
Regard for neighbor,
Love for God,
--a community and fellowship and enterprise against which there is no law, and without which there cannot be any law worth having.

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Closing Prayer

*Help us, O Lord, to stand fast by your Spirit --
to use our freedom wisely and well.
Make our inheritance as citizens of this country
(and even more, as citizens in your eternal kingdom)
a lasting legacy -- a good example -- bearing your spirit's fruit
for the sake of the world, and to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.*