*Freedom in Christ* Homecrest PC

*Matthew 11:25-30 and Romans 7:15-25* 7/2/17

 This weekend marks our nation’s 241st birthday. Compared to many other civilizations of the world and the history of humankind, America is still a relatively “young” country with 241 years that seem like a “blip” on the radar or a drop in the bucket. Over the years, America has seen its glorious and triumphant days as a united country, but it also has its days of contention, division and even a civil war due to various our differences.

However, in the spirit of maintaining the peace and unity of the body, somehow we must strive to collaborate and work together with mutual respect and understanding while putting our politics aside. Even as Abraham Lincoln once famously quoted Jesus’s teaching that “*if a house is divided against itself, that house will certainly not stand.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Independence Day is more than just a celebration with fireworks, the backyard BBQ, the beach, (or to see how many hot-dogs that one can stuff yourself with), it is a time for us to pause and reflect upon who we are and what values we stand for when it comes to our **freedom**, and subsequently **at what costs**? The term “freedom” also takes on a whole different meaning for those of us who profess faith and allegiance to our God, in addition to be citizens of this country.

Incidentally in the text that we read earlier, taken from Paul’s letter to the Romans, also addresses the theme of **personal freedom** and **allegiance**. The freedom that Paul talked about is the **freedom of our conscience and purpose. Even though we might be spiritually liberated under the law of God, we are still physically enslaved or being held captive by our sins.[[2]](#footnote-2) Can we realistically live freely on one hand while under the consciousness of our sins on the other?**

Ever since the days of Adam and Eve, evil has entered into our lives and it has robbed us of the privilege and freedom that we once enjoyed with God. We’re in danger of falling off the slippery slope as created by our sins that not only alienate us from God but also our relationship with one another. We find ourselves being held in our own captivity, because of our sinfulness and guilt of conscience. We are certainly NOT free. **Our faith and our life intertwine and dictate the course of our daily activities and our thoughts.**

 A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to celebrate the 4th of July in the city where it all began – Philadelphia. I thought how appropriate it would be to celebrate the nation’s Independence Day in that city while soaking in with all of the festivities on that day. Actually I was actually that many of the historic landmarks such as the Liberty Bell, the Constitution Museum and the Independence Hall remained opened on the federal holiday.

 As I listened in on the narration by the National Park Service rangers about this history and the significance of the signing of the *Declaration of Independence,* the famous words of the Declaration resonated in my mind… “*that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable* ***Rights****, that among these are* ***Life****,* ***Liberty*** *and the pursuit of* ***Happiness****.”*

 Subsequently I did a little research and looked up who were these men who put their names on the dotted line under the *Declaration of Independence* on July 4th, 1776. I was particularly curious of **how the founding fathers’ faith might have influenced their roles in the government and politics**. After all, we need not look further to come to the realization that faith, culture and politics still influence one another. They unite us as well as divide us as a nation today.

Of all of the signers of the *Declaration of Independence,*[[3]](#footnote-3)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Episcopalian/Anglican | 32 | 57.1% |  |
| Congregationalist | 13 | 23.2% |  |
| Presbyterian | 12 | 21.4% |  |
| Quaker | 2 | 3.6% |  |
| Unitarian or Universalist | 2 | 3.6% |  |
| Catholic | 1 | 1.8% |  |
| TOTAL | 56 | 100% |  |

Interestingly ALL of them claimed some form of religious affiliation, even though some discreetly maintained their fundamental belief of the separation of Church and State. This included Thomas Jefferson, who was the chief author of the *Declaration*, even though he was baptized as an Episcopalian/Anglican. Some historians even argued that he was an atheist altogether. Nevertheless, faith and politic do intertwine and certainly have a profound impact upon each other back then, and as it is today.

 In the 1st passage that we read earlier, from his letter to the early church in Rome, the Apostle Paul was addressing a slightly different kind of freedom – our **spiritual freedom**. What does it mean when we are free spiritually? But first, we must identify where our spiritual freedom comes from? **The source of our ultimate spiritual freedom comes through Christ and Christ alone!** We were ALL created equal in God’s eyes, yet we ALL have fallen short of God’s grace.

 **Our freedom in Christ does not mean that we can do whatever we want out, or if we leave our conscience unchecked.** Ultimately, we must still be held accountable for our action, while subjected to the spiritual law and under the sovereignty of God. However, Christ did offer himself to us so that we may anchor our faith and our hope upon our future. The burden and the weight of our sins may be cast upon Christ.

As Steven read for us earlier in our Gospel lesson from *Matthew*, Jesus said, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon me, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Perhaps addressing before a group of peasants, Jesus used this analogy of a yoke, which is a heavy wooden harness that fits over the shoulder of an oxen or a horse. The animal would then pull another piece of equipment in order to perform some agricultural duties. Jesus used this analogy to compare someone who may be carrying heavy burdens of sins and guilt in one’s lives…sins that weigh us down and alienate us from God and our neighbors. Only Christ himself can alleviate us from such burdens of sins and guilt. “*Take my yoke upon me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* **True freedom can only come at the expense and total surrendering of our allegiance in Christ!!**

Independence Day may carry different meanings to different people. To one of my long-time friends, for instance, this day bears great significance personally as it marks a new beginning and a chance to start all over from scratch – a clean slate so to speak.

You see, about 12 years ago, my friend got himself into trouble with the law that eventually landed him in jail for almost a year. For the past 10 years, Independence Day serves an important reminder and milestone in his life – a NEW life that is. During his time while he was in prison, my friend rediscovered his long-lost relationship with Christ through the prison ministry there. He re-dedicated his life to God and vowed to be a new person once he got out. After all he’s still young, only in his mid 30’s. He still got a whole life and a new future ahead of him.

 My friend was not ashamed of his personal sinful past and failures. He was pretty opened to talk about his own personal transformation and what a new man he has become. He looked upon this as part of God’s redemptive work in his life. Everything happened for a reason and God has given him a new chance in life…and he’s simply making the most of every opportunity.

The other day, he shared the following tribute of his personal transformation on his Facebook page. “Independence” and “freedom in Christ” mean a whole lot different for him, as he wrote:

*“10 years ago yesterday I was coming out of jail for 240+ days and facing a lot more time but was a new man- I celebrated freedom that Jesus grants to us all by his amazing Love and can't thank him for all I've been through and how much he has brought me through - And granted me a son- that has given me such a new sense of Love and gratitude towards Jesus. Thank you Lord for a caring family that always stood by my side when I didn't deserve them to- True freedom comes from you and you alone!!! I will boast in my weaknesses - for his power is made perfect in weakness - and his grace will always be sufficient. Thanks be to you Jesus.*

 In a moment, we will once again come before this table of grace and redemption that Christ has set out for us. **This is NOT a table for those who are righteous, or to measure who’s more worthy than the others, but rather this is a table for sinners who are in need of God’s grace, acceptance, and ultimately forgiveness.**

 As one theologian put is, **every time we are gathered around this table, there is CONFESSION to be made. God is listening!**

**There is FREEDOM to be embraced. God is liberating!**

**There is GRACE to be extended. God is offering Godself to us with opened arms!** This is where God’s peace, reconciliation and transformation take place, right before our eyes and planted in our hearts.

 May we be reminded that every time we receive these elements, we rejoice in the **freedom that can only be found in Christ**. By God’s grace, we are liberated of our heavy burdens in our hearts. God has offered us this cup of salvation and this bread of life so that we are sustained and nourished both physically and spiritually.

 As the Apostle Paul wrote to the early church in Galatia,

*“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [[5]](#footnote-5)*

Friends, God has offered us such freedom so we may live out God’s purpose as intended for each of us. God has commissioned us to share this joy and freedom with others around us and not just to keep it for ourselves.

 Thanks be to God for this immeasurable gift of freedom that can only be found in Christ, in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Mark 3:25* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Romans 7:25* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/2546951/posts [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Matthew 11:28-30* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Galatians 5:13-14* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)