

## Sermon for Proper 9, Year C

July 4, 2010

Trinity Episcopal Church in Lawrence, Kansas

The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

**Liberty.** It's a word we hear a lot around the Fourth of July every year. Many of us recall studies in American History or in Philosophy that attempted to deepen our appreciation for the value associated with the word, particularly in relation to the revolt against British rule and the founding of the United States of America.

The Liberty Bell is so called because of the inscription it bears from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Leviticus: "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof."

Patrick Henry (1736-1799), one of the most influential advocates of the American Revolution, is probably best known for his "Give me Liberty or Give me Death!" speech.

Sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was commissioned to design a sculpture with the year 1876 in mind for completion, to commemorate the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence. That sculpture, The Statue of Liberty, was not dedicated until 1886. She stands today as a lasting symbol of the friendship established between French people and the American people at the time of the American Revolution. The pursuit of liberty is at the heart of that friendship.

These are but a few of the many reminders of the significance of liberty that come to mind as we celebrate our nation's birth. I wonder if liberty means as much to the American people today as it did on that first Fourth of July. We still enjoy liberty, but perhaps we are not as conscious of it as those to whom it has been deprived. Maybe we take it for granted.

Nineteenth century abolitionist Wendell Phillips cautioned, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." This would be a good day to heed his words, examine ourselves, and seek a renewed appreciation for liberty and a renewed commitment to value liberty enough to use it wisely.

Liberty, in the philosophical or political sense, can be viewed both as the freedom to act and as the absence of coercion. In both cases, an individual is responsible for how he or she exercises that liberty. People of faith – any faith – will look to the teachings of their faith for guidance in the decisions liberty permits them to make. What should I do with the freedom I have to exercise my will and from coercion to act against my will? How does my relationship with God influence the way I express the liberty that has been made possible for me and my neighbor?

The founders of our nation differed in some significant ways in their religious views. However, there seems to have been a common conviction that liberty was a basic and inalienable human right endowed by the Creator. Indeed, the theme of liberty is woven throughout the scriptures that are sacred to Christians. The theme is so prominent that one would have to be blind to miss it even a casual reading of either testament.

A short summary of how liberty is treated in the New Testament might prompt us to find ways the liberty we have in Christ will help us better exercise the liberty we have as Americans.

The biblical theme of liberty has to do with freedom from any form of slavery or oppression. Spiritually, the power that enslaves is sin (John 8:34) and liberty is deliverance *from* sin and *for* a right relationship with God and our neighbor. When the Seventy returned from their mission to their neighbors, they were excited that they were able to perform so many miraculous feats. But Jesus exhorted them not to be so excited about the miracles they performed and the power they had over people and things, but instead to rejoice that their names are written in heaven. In other words, to focus on their relationship with God which can never be taken away. So, we are liberated for a divine purpose; to live in relationship with God, to serve God, and glorify God for ever.

With liberation from the enslavement of sin comes holiness of life, the desire and capability to do what is right and good. It comes as the free gift of God's grace declared in Baptism. In Romans and Galatians, we read about the liberty that is the possession of God's children (e.g. Romans 8:21 KJV and Galatians 2:4). In 2 Corinthians, St. Paul associates liberty with the presence of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17). In the Epistle of James, we read about "the perfect law of liberty" (James 1:25). The Gospel of John says that the instrument through which this liberty is imparted is "the truth" (John 8:32). And Christians are warned not to abuse their liberty in Christ (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16).

St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians, from which we have been reading for the past several Sundays, has been called "The Magna Charta of Christian Liberty." In it, the Apostle writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)" He concludes his discourse with these words about the use of our freedom in Christ, "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (Galatians 6:8-10)" Thus, we often pray, "O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom."

As followers of Jesus Christ and citizens of his kingdom, we are in possession of a spiritual liberty that no earthly authority can take away from us. May our citizenship in that realm guide the exercise of our liberty we also enjoy as citizens of "one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all."

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Let us pray:

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace: Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The Book of Common Prayer, 1979