

Independence Day, by Tim Hall

The 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 3 July 2022

[RCL:] 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Note: The theme of this sermon is independence vs. interdependence, hopefully leading to a conclusion where our dependence (and devotion) to Christ and our interdependence on our fellow Christians is what really gives us our true independence... from sin and fear...

Good morning. And “Peace to this house!” I’m so happy to be here with you as we gather on this Sunday of 4th of July weekend. Since this is a national holiday weekend, I hope you’ll indulge me using Independence Day as my homiletic theme this morning.

As Americans we value our independence above most everything else. After all, as we declared in 1776, “We are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. These are proclaimed as self-evident, God-given truths. To me, the independence we celebrate on the 4th of July is most closely related to our unalienable right of liberty.

The first definition of Independence I found is to be “free from outside control; not depending on another's authority”. Our war with England was already underway for more than a year when the Declaration of Independence was issued. And it would take 8 long years and cost the lives of more than 25,000 colonists to secure that independence, our freedom from outside control.

Freedom. It may surprise you that the word Freedom is never used in the Declaration of Independence. But it appeared significantly in the 1st amendment to our constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

Today, we celebrate our freedom with parades and fireworks; we commemorate those who died in war with the phrase, “Freedom isn’t free,” and we uphold our 1st amendment freedoms vigorously. We’ve engrained it into our state mottos... in New Hampshire, the state where my father was raised and where I have vacationed my whole life, the motto is “Live free or die”. And in our own home state of Virginia, our flag depicts Virtue personified standing with her foot on the

prostrate body of a dead king with the inscription: Sic semper tyrannis – “Thus always to tyrants”.

But, despite talking a lot about freedom, we are not always sure what it means.

The most obvious meaning of freedom is the ability to do and say whatever we want, without interference from any authority or institution. With this definition of freedom, it is little wonder we often disagree on what it means to be a freedom-loving American.

For example, on July 4th in more suburban and urban areas, the freedom to blast off massive amounts of fireworks in one’s driveway is severely limited by most city governments, due to the noise and the risk of fire. So, even on this day when we celebrate our freedom, our freedom to create giant explosions is balanced by our neighbors’ freedom to live in an explosion-free environment.

My freedom to own as many guns as I want of whatever type may be in conflict with your freedom to send your kids to school or attend a movie or go shopping or worship in church without fear of another mass shooting.

Our freedoms are always in tension with the freedom of the people around us. When we think of our neighbors, freedom isn’t just the ability to do whatever we want, especially if that action puts our neighbors at risk. As Nelson Mandela put it, “to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” Or as the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Galatians from last Sunday’s lectionary, 5:13, “you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love serve one another.”

Freedom, liberty, independence. What does it mean to be independent? Throughout our lives we go through different stages of independence... from infancy to old age the ability of a person to act independently is appreciated. “My granddaughter gets herself up and dressed and out to the bus stop without being told what to do... she’s getting to be so independent.” “My son-in-law started his own business that’s doing quite well. He’s such an independent spirit.” “My wife was known in her career as an independent thinker, always coming up with innovative approaches to solving problems.” “I’m so grateful that my dad was in independent living until the day he died.”

But sometimes we may take it to extremes. Our desire for independence and self-indulgent freedom may drive us away from one another. I know that there can be differences of opinion in theology or interpretation of the word that lead to church schisms and new denominations. And we certainly see differences in politics, where people are taking more and more rigid stances on “their” interpretations of freedom and liberty, leaving it to the courts to decide which constitutional freedoms take precedence. Often we struggle with each other. Sometimes we are even in conflict with ourselves.

I’m reminded of the story of the rescue of Robinson Crusoe, who had been shipwrecked alone on a deserted island for many years. When a rescue ship finally arrived, the captain of the ship noticed three huts in the palm trees just above the ocean breakers. When he asked what they were, Crusoe replied, “The one in the center is my home. And the one on the left is my church.” “And what is the one on the right?” the captain asked. “Well,” replied Crusoe, “that’s where I used to go to church.”

Yes, sometimes we are even in conflict with ourselves. We may be looking for freedom from self-doubt, envy, anger, bad habits, and the list goes on. Naaman was seeking freedom from his leprosy. And he didn’t know where to turn until a Hebrew servant girl urged him to find the prophet, Elisha, who, she assured his wife, would cure him. So Naaman sets off with great riches in tow, thinking he can buy his cure. But he doesn’t seek the prophet. Instead he seeks other worldly power... the king of Israel, where, of course, he finds no hope for a cure. It is not until the LORD seeks him, through Elisha, that he is cured, and then still only reluctantly, after his servants implore him to follow the easy directions given to him: to “Wash in the Jordan River, and be clean”. Riches cannot secure his freedom from leprosy. But grace can.

This story from the Old Testament foreshadows Jesus’ ministry to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Naaman was an Aramean, a Syrian, a gentile. And yet he received unearned grace from the God of Israel.

Early in his ministry, when Jesus visits the synagogue in Nazareth, as recorded in chapter 4 of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus talks about Naaman. You remember the story... Jesus has been praised by everyone throughout Galilee and now, after reading

from Isaiah that Sabbath day in Nazareth, he rolls up the scroll and declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

"All spoke well of him," Luke says, "and were amazed at his gracious words." But it is not long before he gets himself into trouble. His references to the widow at Zarephath, cured by Elijah, and Naaman the Syrian, both foreigners and gentiles, infuriate Jesus' townsfolk. For these episodes imply the need for a change of attitude and an acceptance of those who are different. And the people of Nazareth are emphatically not ready for that. Instead, they drove him out to the edge of a cliff, where Jesus barely escapes with his life, never to return to his hometown.

Now Jesus, much later in his ministry and after experiencing rejection countless times, in his sending of the seventy is implementing a true act of independence... they were instructed to carry nothing. How free is that? They are to rely on each other, and become dependent on the kindness of strangers. And it's that dependence that sets them free to proclaim the Good News throughout the towns.

If this story tells us anything, it tells us that we do not want Jesus organizing volunteers at our church. Can you imagine? Everybody's milling around in coffee hour after the service, chatting and laughing and getting caught up with each other, and then Jesus steps into the middle of the room, clearing his throat and holding up a clipboard as he says loudly: "Excuse me, may I have everyone's attention for a minute? I still need seventy volunteers for a service opportunity this week. This is a great chance to go out into dangerous neighborhoods and invite yourselves into people's homes. It will be like you are defenseless lambs sent out into the midst of ravenous wolves. Oh, and please remember not to bring anything that might make it easier or safer or more comfortable for you to do that, okay? So just come on over here and we'll get you all signed up. Thank you!"

That's no way to recruit volunteers! How does he expect anyone to come? Everyone knows you have to sell it: tell people it won't be hard, that anybody can do this; tell them it won't take a lot of time or effort; tell them everything will be set up for them, all they have to do is show up...you have to make it easy for them to commit, so your program can be a success. What is he thinking?

Of course, Jesus wasn't asking for volunteers. That's a pretty important thing to notice. Jesus appoints the seventy and sends them out. He doesn't ask for volunteers, and he doesn't wait to see who comes forward on their own. He's the Lord, after all. One reason this passage is so hard for us to understand is that it goes completely against one of the fundamental values of our culture, which is self-sufficiency, i.e. independence.

But the whole point of what Jesus is doing is to ensure that he's sending these seventy apostles out ***completely unprepared!*** They are not permitted to have anything that might enable them any level of self-sufficiency. As a result, they are the polar opposite of self-sufficient; their well-being is utterly dependent on the people to whom they have been sent, some of whom will respond with hostility rather than hospitality.

Of course, if they knew that beautiful psalm that we read this morning, which they probably did, they would know they have nothing to fear. "You brought me up, O Lord, from the dead; you restored my life. You turned my wailing into dancing and clothed me with joy. Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing, O Lord my God, and I will give you thanks for ever."

This is not going to be easy, Jesus tells them. It's going to require a huge amount of time and effort; and no matter how hard you try, you're not going to be able to control the outcome. Some of the people you visit will not share in the peace you offer; sometimes whole towns that you visit will reject you. But that's not the point. What Jesus wants is to ensure that as many people as possible get to hear the good news that God's kingdom has come near.

That's the point; that's his goal, his definition of success. Because you never really know who's going to respond and who's not, who's really open to receiving the gospel in all its beauty and difficulty and complexity and grace and *then* living their lives ***in it*** more faithfully and fully as a result. You never really know who is desperate to hear good news; and you have to go out to them because you can't expect them to come asking about it if they *haven't even heard it.*

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the church in North America today, is that our plan of how to do ministry is designed to welcome people in to our churches to hear the good news. That's how we evaluate our success: how many people attend worship, how many people join the church as members. But, for all sorts

of reasons, fewer and fewer people are coming in on their own now. But that doesn't mean they're not hungry for good news; perhaps they haven't even heard it. Or, more painfully, perhaps we haven't given them enough reason to think we really have any to share. In any case, it is time for a change of plans.

“Wait”, you and I might want to say; “that's not what I signed up for”. Maybe not, Jesus agrees. But the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few, and I wasn't asking for volunteers. I am sending you out, but I'm not sending you unprepared: I'm ***freeing you*** from the chains that bind you, from fear and self-doubt, and I'm giving you good news to share and partners to go with you and help share it. That will be enough; that will be your true independence day; go, and you will see.

And then, when you do this work, “rejoice that your names are written in heaven”.

Let us pray.

Episcopal prayer that uses the phrase “perfect freedom” (A Collect for Peace)

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

From the sermon “Freedom” by David W. Peters, the author of *Death Letter: God, Sex, and War (Tactical 16)* and *Post-Traumatic God: How the Church Cares for People Who Have Been to Hell and Back* (Church Publishing). He currently serves as the Vicar of the Pflugerville, Texas, Church Plant in the Diocese of Texas. Find him on Twitter @dvdpeters.

From the sermon “Changing Plans” by The Rev. J. C. Austin, 7 July 2013 and found at: http://day1.org/4898-changing_plans. Rev. Austin is director of the Center for Christian Leadership at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, NY. Member of: Presbyterian Church (USA). Representative of: Auburn Theological Seminary