

Independence Day, by Tim Hall

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 7 July 2019

[RCL:] Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 66:1-8; 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 overjoyed to be here again at The First Congregational Church of Alstead, this time to help lead off your summer worship season as we gather on this Sunday after the 4th of July. Perhaps last Sunday you heard a sermon regarding freedom or liberty as a precursor to that big day just past. But since this still feels like the holiday weekend, I hope you won’t mind 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... here in New Hampshire the motto is “Live free or die”. And in my 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.

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, "For you were called to freedom, brothers [and sisters]. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, 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 is doing so well. He's still in independent living."

But sometimes we may take it to extremes. For instance, our desire for independence may drive us away from one another. I don't know the history of why there are 3 Congregational churches in Alstead, and I like to think it was for convenience in former days when travel was not as easy as it is today and the church was growing. However, I know that sometimes there can be differences of opinion, perhaps in theology or interpretation of the word, or (God-forbid) politics, that may cause splits.

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 ship finally arrived at his island the captain noticed three buildings in the palm trees just above the ocean breakers. When 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... that's where I used to go to church."

Sometimes we struggle with each other. Sometimes we even in conflict with ourselves. We may be looking for freedom from self-doubt, envy, anger, bad habits, and the list goes on. As Paul points out to the Galatians, there are so many things, the works of the flesh, that may cause us to stray from living by the Spirit.

But Jesus, in his sending of the seventy was 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 from Luke 10 tells us anything, it tells us that you do not want Jesus organizing volunteers at your 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 strange and dangerous neighborhoods and invite yourselves into people's homes. It will be like you are defenseless lambs sent out alone 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's 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, he wasn't asking for volunteers. That's a pretty important thing to notice right from the beginning. 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 of all this, they are the complete 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 passage from Isaiah 66 that we read this morning, which they probably did, they would know they have nothing to fear, being cradled in the everlasting arms and bosom of the Lord. "You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants!"

This is not going to be easy, Jesus tells them. It's going to require an extraordinary 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 what we've trained our pastors to do; that's how we've organized our congregations to work. And that's how we evaluate our success: how many people attend worship, how many people join the church as members. And that seems to have worked pretty well at one time. But, for all sorts of reasons, fewer and fewer people across the country 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