

This weekend has so many celebrations... Like most holidays, we can celebrate with cookouts, and reunions with friends and family... but we can also reflect on deeper meanings of the holiday. Yesterday, July 4, is a celebration of Independence from the control of the British government. We celebrate “Freedom,” freedom that has many different meanings to different people. I was sent a Charlie Brown cartoon that says a lot: Charlie Brown says to Linus: “I’d like to ask God why he allows terrible things like hate, racism, war, famine and homelessness.” Linus replies, “I’ve always thought that God was asking **us** the that same question.” This underscores the truth that God is not a puppeteer and we are not puppets. God does not plan or control every action on earth. Humans, and creatures, were given free will; we were given a mind and a will.

The UCC slogan about freedom is that it must be wed to responsibility: we are not free to do or say absolutely anything; we can’t drive when drunk. Parents grant children more and more freedom, but only when they prove they can be responsible.

A Christian view of freedom is that the Grace of God is a “free gift,” that we do not have to be perfect; all of us fall short of divine and ethical ideals, and yet Jesus showed that Grace, Mercy, Forgiveness is for all. All we need is a humble heart, a receptive heart and we can receive love and grace without price.

There are so many levels to freedom... there is the international and societal level, and then there is an interpersonal and soul level. Sometimes they overlap. One place of overlapping is that whether an individual or a nation, no one should be controlled, taken over, or dominated in any way. That is death to the soul of an individual and death to the soul of a nation.

So this weekend we celebrate freedom from domination by England, yet we also hear many stories of those who have never felt

free in this country. Like one who was bullied can become a bully, The nation that was once a colony, can become a nation that wants to colonize, to take over other lands. The opening hymn has some of my favorite lines in it: “America, America, God mend thine every flaw.” That is a true patriotic line...it is not hatred of America; To love our country is to be honest about our flaws, to repent of them, and try to make our country better.

To follow Jesus is to remember his words of challenge, for repentance, for change. Today’s gospel reading is fascinating. Jesus criticizes his listeners, “This generation is like children, calling to one another: We played the flute and you did not dance; We wailed and you did not mourn.” (Come on, join our celebration and dance... or Come on, join us in wailing and crying). Sounds exactly like what I heard in Chile, a spat between Christians: Roman Catholics and Pentecostals, emphasizing polar extremes. My Pentecostal friends were proud to say: When someone dies, we play trumpets have a parade, and rejoice about their passage to heaven... Those Roman Catholic have such somber funerals, heads down with tears. The Catholics probably had their own criticisms: “those Pentecostals ignore reality of grief.” On July 4, we can similarly emphasize polar opposites things. On the one hand, Yay for the “bombs bursting in air, showing that our flag was still there.” Yay for revolutionary war that won our freedom. On the other hand, many wars with the Native Americans tribes at that time, which were of course examples of genocide. Yes, Dear God, mend our every flaw.

As professor of New Testament Eugene Eung Park comments, Jesus was pointing out the “absurdity of the taunting of the children” (you did not dance, you did not mourn). Jesus relates it to the absurdity of the slanders against himself and John the Baptist

(John came neither eating or drinking and I, the Son of Man, came eating and drinking. You slandered him as a crazy, demon-possessed person, and you slander me as a glutton and a drunkard!)

Freedom means we are free to be who God made us to be. Free to be our authentic selves. Free to follow our callings, and know that we are all called to follow Jesus' ways in different ways, that we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" as Paul once said. That means that we are to humbly work out our own journeys of faith, according to the gifts given to us.

Freedom, in the spiritual sense, has everything to do with diversity. As Paul says, we have differing gifts, differing skills. The gospel story this morning could easily echo the truth of Ecclesiastes that there is a time and a season for everything, "There is a time to mourn and a time to dance, you both have a point, but don't criticize and slander the other children who don't care to join your group." Jesus was not into group-think; he was not into cookie-cutter Christianity. Paul famously said to the Roman church, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds." There is not one way to be "free in Christ," not one way to experience salvation or healing; little tracts that try to say so, are like children calling in the marketplace; "Do it this way, pray this way, use these words."

Jesus has some concise words for us children who keep criticizing and slandering those who express themselves differently: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. (Wisdom is proven by her works.)" Yes, the way we "treat one another" is the central test of our faith... and we could say that in the Bible, how we treat others, is most importantly seen in how we treat any who are poor, vulnerable, or marginalized. This is a priority in all of the Bible.

It can be seem *difficult* to show love and grace to those who are different from ourselves. But that really is everybody, so we are constantly doing the *work* of love. It is always a bit of an effort to try to listen well and understand others. It can be like our cover image, pushing a boulder up a hill. Yet Jesus promises us that it can be easy, that his burden can be light. (We can imagine in our cover image, that the large boulder is light and the road is not too steep.) This is a paradox: on the one hand, Jesus says take up your cross and follow me; on the other hand he says that his burden is light.

One commentator I think found a key to the paradox: “The easy yoke means having something to do, a purpose that summons forth your best.” If our purpose is love, focused listening, doing our best to understand the other, this work, this yoke, can become easier and lighter with time and practice... and renewable energy from the Spirit, because Divine love and purpose is renewable; in Christ we are born again and again, set free from our flaws, constantly being transformed. May it be so with our personal relationships, and also in our international relations. May there be more freedom for all, for as our Declaration of Independence said well: we are all endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights: Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We can be ourselves, and let others be their true selves. (We can be free to pursue happiness in our own way, our own journey toward peace and well being). Showing such kindness and graciousness toward others, allowing them to be free, is the meaning of Love. This work can become easier and more natural when we walk with the Spirit of Christ in our hearts.
Amen.