

“Freedom *for*”
Deuteronomy 8:11-20, Galatians 5:13-15, John 8:31-36
June 30, 2019

This is once again the time of year when we hear an awful lot about freedom, liberty, independence; about flags, parades, and the American Way; about God, rights, and justice.

It's fine to bandy about all these high-sounding words. But just like the Lord's Prayer, which risks becoming meaningless through constant rote repetition, and just like our flag, which we *think* is treated with respect but in reality is often treated with nonchalance, I wonder if we really know *why* we speak of freedom, of liberty, of independence, and all those other fine ideals.

Most people, when they hear of freedom, think of freedom *from* ... freedom from something, such as some evil - freedom from want, or freedom from fear. But ask someone what freedom is *for*, and you will usually get a funny look. Freedom *for*? To most people in this country, freedom is for doing whatever I please. Isn't that freedom? Indeed, that is the way freedom and liberty are usually defined and regarded in our society more than 200 years after 1776 and all that.

To illustrate, think of Sunday, our sabbath. People know that the Sabbath is freedom *from* - freedom from work, from your boss, from the office or shop floor or whatever. But what is the Sabbath *for*? Not all that long ago Madison Avenue was telling us that weekends were made for Michelob. A lot of people think Sunday is little more than a lazy day spent with the New York Times. Either way, they haven't really thought of what the freedom of Sunday is *for*, because if it's for anything, the Sabbath is not for individual ends. We have rendered unto Caesar what is Caesar's by paying taxes on what we do Monday through Friday. But we forget that we also have to render unto God what is God's. Only after *that* is there time to be selfish - which is to say there never really is any time for selfishness at all.

So it is, when it comes to freedom, especially the freedom we will be celebrating this Thursday: historically, we are celebrating freedom *from* oppression of a Church and a State that insisted we must do things their way or not at all. That's the answer to what is the freedom of 1776 a freedom *from*. But how about what that freedom is *for*? At the very root of the Pilgrims, Plymouth Rock, 1620, the Mayflower, 1776, the Revolution, John Adams - all of which were brought to you by Congregationalism, by the way - at these roots was the desire to have freedom *for* worshiping God - not according to the dictates of King and Bishop, but according to the dictates of an inspired conscience.

But have we thrown out the baby with the bathwater? Gone are King and Bishop. But disappearing from our people is the very notion of conscience itself, much less a conscience inspired by God. Disappearing is the idea that freedom won is not to be thrown away through waste or neglect - two things we Americans are very good at. Disappearing is the realization that the Constitution separated Church from State not so that Church could be forgotten, but so that the churches could grow alongside the State as a check and a balance on the civil order, all the while enriching it.

One of the Founding Fathers put it this way: "If this land is not governed by God, then we will be ruled by tyrants." And although I would hesitate to characterize any administration in our memory as tyrannical, I *do* note that neither Republican nor Democrat, conservative or liberal, right or left, has been able to give us a government worthy of what our Constitution calls "a more perfect union." Whether our leaders have worn their religion on their sleeves, or whether they have done nothing to advertise their own beliefs - or lack thereof - the results have been little different.

A foreign diplomat once offered this Fourth of July toast to the United States on Independence Day: "Let me congratulate you on the second greatest date in history." Almost immediately there were mumbles through the embassy hall. What kind of gaffe was this? Had the diplomat been taking lessons from the current American president? Did this diplomat imply that *his* country's national holiday was greater than America's?

People were at best confused, at worst insulted. Swiftly perceiving the cause for the unease, the diplomat noted that the greatest date in history is “December 25, for had there been no Christmas, there would never have been a Fourth of July.”

How many of us remember that, as we watch the game or parades or fireworks on TV today? How many recall that our nation was founded with freedom *for* something other than for barbecues and brews? How convenient it is to forget our obligations and duties, while indulging in our supposed rights and so-called privileges.

Consider the words on the courthouse of Cuyahoga County in Cleveland: “Obedience to Law is Liberty.” It’s hard to argue with that. But as one judge pointed out, there is a significant omission from the inscription, for it comes from the pen of Richard Hooker, the 16th century author, who originally wrote it this way: “Obedience to *Divine* Law is Liberty.”

Or consider the oft-quoted verse from John’s Gospel: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” Once again, a noble thought subscribed to by just about everyone. But how does the verse *really* read? “Jesus said, ‘If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples; and if you are truly my disciples, then you know the truth, and that truth will make you free’.”

How convenient to forget our roots, our heritage, our founding. How easy to ignore that freedom *from* is meaningless unless it results in freedom *for*. We can only declare independence from what is wrong if we declare dependence on what is right. We can only pledge abstinence from evil if we pledge allegiance to what is good. We can only be counted for truth if we separate ourselves from falsehood. So did they realize in 1620, and in 1776. May we not forget this today, here, as we gather 243 years after the Declaration of Independence. And, having secured freedom to worship our God - not so much in *our* own way, but in the ways that God has led us - may we remain true to the author of our liberties, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: