

A Declaration of Freedom

Exodus 32:1-10; 1 Peter 2:13-17; John 8:31-38

There are obvious reasons for us to celebrate freedom today. The coincidence of the celebration of our nation's declaration of independence and our celebration of freedom in Christ is rich with opportunity for comparing and contrasting. But let me cut to the chase; while comparing the two may be interesting and even enlightening, we gather in this place on this day to declare that all allegiances to earthly institutions are secondary to our confession that Jesus is Lord and that to be free in Christ is to be free indeed. "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom". (II Cor. 3:17)

You would expect that sitting in a Baptist church with this opportunity you would hear something about separation of Church and State. After all, Jesus taught us to
"render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

We have been taught by our Lord that we are called to be
"in the world but not of the world."

You would expect to be reminded that early in this nation's history Roger Williams referred to the "hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world."

You would expect to hear something about John Leland, Baptist preacher and friend to Thomas Jefferson and other founders, who said that "experience, the best teacher, has taught us that fondness of magistrates to foster Christianity has done more harm than all the persecutions ever did."

You would expect me to remind you that Leland also worked diligently on the Virginia statement of rights and the early drafts of the Bill of Rights because he felt that the earlier statement of "no religious test for public office" did not go far enough in guaranteeing religious liberty.

Leland and Isaac Backus had profound influences on the Bill of Rights and the first amendment to the constitution related to religious liberty. Early Baptists in this country knew that the only way to obtain their own freedom was to guarantee freedom for all people. Power plays to garner support for one's own interests, even if won for the moment, would always be subject to political winds and compromise. So they felt they could work through and with government, not for special interests, *per se*, but for the interest of all persons of faith, and persons of no faith.

Their understanding of religious liberty was rooted in their understanding of freedom of conscience offered by God.

But I'm not going to talk about those things...

Well, except to say this; even though these values are rooted in our tradition, it is not the message that will probably be heard from many pulpits today.

Many churches will celebrate "God and Country" as though they have equal billing. Some will quote modern religious leaders, even Baptists, who claim that separation of church and state is a lie. Worse yet, that it is a lie of Satan intended to deny our identity as a Christian nation.

Others will call the people in the pew to wage a holy war to take back this country for God.

People will cheer. It feels good to be on the right side of things.

It is an adrenalin rush to know that you are fighting a just and holy battle.

But I must go back to the beginning.

God does not take equal billing to any institution.

God is not bound by our limited understanding, and we are here today to celebrate the freedom born out of God's love for us and Christ's death at the hands of the imperial state and religious authority, and our Lord's glorious resurrection that calls us to proclaim every Sunday to be Easter worship.

We are here today to affirm our confessional life as a community of faith which is deeper, broader and higher than constitutional life.

So today we are attentive to freedom as Christians and those things that can rob us of the power of our liberty.

There is no question that there are biblical injunctions for us to live as good citizens...Our passage from 1st Peter this morning is just one such example.

We are called to support those human institutions that help guarantee civic order and safety.

We are to pray for our leaders.

We are to serve community.

And these things were said at the time of Nero's rule and his growing persecution of Christians.

We are even called to love our enemies, to have the mind of Christ in relation to our neighbors.

But having a conversation about citizenship, much less Christian citizenship is difficult today. In a society that seems to be increasingly oriented to self-interest and conformity, we have exchanged discussions about civics to debates about hyper-patriotism.

And it is a debate that is becoming shriller with a perverted model of patriotism that excludes rather than includes,
that turns into villain anyone who disagrees with their definitions.

But Christian citizenship and patriotism should never be equated with imperialism (civic or religious),
colonialism,
exceptionalism,
dismissive and demeaning behaviors
or blind obedience born of denial or gullibility.

I was reading a brief article by David Gushee, Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University and McAfee School of Theology, on Christian Citizenship. He talked about two primary, and extreme, functional approaches to understanding Christian citizenship today.

The first he labeled the “apostasy option” and describes it as a position where “loyalty to nation is primary, but is conflated and confused with loyalty to Christ.” People who hold to this notion are passionate about America and act as if everything that advances America’s causes advances Christ’s as well. At no point does it allow “Jesus as Lord” to challenge national interests. It is, in fact, in its absoluteness, idolatry. Gushee fears that this is the way that most American Christians do their citizenship.

The second approach he calls the “abdication option”. It is the trend among many academics and activists for whom loyalty to Christ leaves no room for allegiance to nation at all. They remind us that we are “resident aliens” and primary citizens in the Kingdom of God. It is not anti-American, but rather a well-meaning attempt to “fall out of love with country in order to fall in love with Jesus”

For me, a faithful reading of scripture calls us to live in the tension between these two extremes...to celebrate the benefits of our good fortune to live in this country while understanding the primacy of our life in the Kingdom of God.

So, what might we say about Christian citizenship?

- 1) Christian citizenship means that we don’t only look out for our self-interests, as Christians or as citizens. It calls us to live the whole of the gospel, rather than bumper-sticker religion and sound bite patriotism.**

Christian Citizens contribute to community in ways that make it better, richer. Through acts of kindness and service they represent the love of God extended to all persons.

They are salt and light.

They are advocates for what is right and good for fellow citizens and they challenge policies, systems and laws that are destructive to their neighbors.

Citizenship calls out virtues like self-effacement, altruism, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Many of you do this routinely...(name some services to community this congregation supports)

2) Christian citizens know that we must grant liberty to all as a way of guaranteeing our own freedoms.

If we believe in freedom, our own for sure, we must oppose demands for conformity. We must not participate in the desire, by intimidation and accusation, to squeeze everyone into the same mold.

Conformity is the enemy of freedom.

This valuing of freedom-for-all calls us to civility in our conversations and disagreements. Good, thoughtful and faithful people can disagree. But there seems to be little civility in our political and community voices.

We demonize, threaten, diminish, slander and destroy in the name of our version of the truth.

Sadly, people who label themselves as Christian citizens are among the most virulent character assassins for the sake of their cause. They have declared a jihad that, from a gospel perspective, is as spiritually deadly as any other.

We are called to work for the freedom of all God's creation, even if we disagree with how others choose to use their freedom.

3) The Christian citizen, and the church, does not sell its soul to political ideology, and its prophetic voice for political favor or power.

In its ambition for recognition and power, some Christians have so merged with particular ideologies that you cannot tell where religion and politics differ. Everyone has a right to support ideological structures that are consistent with their faith and values, especially when those are believed to advance human dignity and community. However, the use of nuanced sound bites

convenient lapses in memory and
character assassination point to something less noble.

It has been said that “familiarity breeds contempt.” But more often, familiarity breeds silence and complacency.

Through assimilation we settle into a comfortableness that silences inconvenient and uncomfortable truth,
dulls our vision,
and stills our tongue.

We eventually find ourselves holding, not the golden ring, but a mess of porridge.

The whole of the gospel calls us to support civic life through thoughtful engagement that resists evil, challenges injustice, and is willing to give up power for the least of these.

Which leads me to return to the unfortunate ruination of a good term like “patriotism”. How have we gotten to where we are today? What is the faithful witness and prophetic challenge the church must proclaim for the sake of our lives together?

I don’t pretend to have the whole answer to that, but I do want to share an observation that for me begins to frame a response. For me, much of our incivility and conflation of church and state is rooted in idolatry.

Recall with me the Exodus passage about the golden calf. Moses was up on the mountain long enough that the people became anxious about their future and about their God. After all, the spokesperson for God, the one who interpreted God’s presence, was absent. They cried out for something to which to attach their anxiety,

something to see,
touch,
admire,
that would convince them that they were not alone in this
journey.

After all, they were in a wilderness,
a long way from the home-that-was
and nowhere close, in miles or understanding, to the home-that-is-to-be.

Aaron obliges, perhaps because he is just as anxious, doubts his own leadership and needs a quick fix.

So, the people are willing to part with things of personal value they have carried out of Egypt, belongings they held as precious, and, putting them into the hands of the voiceless leader, find themselves with something to which to attach their anxiety.

So relieved and so pleased with themselves, they dance themselves into a frenzy.

I find the Exodus story a wonderful metaphor for the mythic journey of growth and development. We follow, not a geographic journey, but a spiritual and emotional journey from bondage to freedom (and accountability),
from childhood to adulthood, with a lot of adolescence,
from dependence to interdependence.

As such, I find in this story a metaphor for understanding our national idolatry.

It is understandable, and well documented, how anxiety is a typical reaction to ambiguity and being forced to look into the unknown of an undefined future. In our growing up years, we latch onto “transitional objects” that we empower to hold our anxiety. When our anxiety is mitigated, by growth and development, we are able to let go of the objects, real or imagined, that helped us through that period. Defensive mechanisms are important sanity-saving and growth-supporting realities. But they are problematic when they become a way of life or if they are allowed to define our only response to life.

We see some of this in the Exodus narrative.

In one experience of overwhelming anxiety on the journey we see the people cry out to return to Egypt. In the face of an uncertain future,
perceived scarcity and
failing confidence in themselves and their leaders,
they idealized their past in that though they were slaves,
it was better than their current plight.

Their newly framed history became an anxiety holding environment of idolatry that threatened their ability to move into a new future.

In this story for today, the golden calf idol served a similar function.

Idolatry is an expression of the inability to mitigate the anxiety of ambiguity.
That is why in the face of anxiety people desire certitude,
easy answers,
rules;
all of which help us to feel more secure, safe.

Idolatry allows us to absolutize the relative, the ambiguous, the contingent.

It stands over against an appreciation for mystery.

It literally contains and imprisons our gods.

Just a few examples....

In the face of economic uncertainty, we see an escalation of idolatry of the free market system. We have, as a society, mostly benefited from a market economy. But an unfettered market, as envisioned by Ayn Rand and her followers, requires a very unchristian notion of social evolution where the poor and marginalized citizens “get what they deserve” and where society is made all the better by their demise.

The religious right has bought wholesale an unchallenged idol of capitalism that they worship as the savior of ‘our way of life.’ Again, it is not whether or not capitalism and a market economy is a viable system, the issue is whether or not we are allowed to challenge it when it is not behaving morally,

question it when it hurts the vulnerable, and

have civil conversations about its abuses as well as its benefits.

In the face of global uncertainty and terrorism, we craft an idol out of the military complex and a hyper, perverted form of patriotism that absolutizes our response to anxiety.

To question it is to be unpatriotic.

To challenge policies and practices that betray our deepest Christian values means that you are un-American, or at worst, a socialist.

When civil liberties and personal freedoms are betrayed by legislation wrapped in a flag, we dare not protest, partly because we too are protected from those who wish to harm us.

I am not saying these are not all very difficult issues and complex challenges. I am saying that the simplifying, absolutizing and spirit-robbing response of idolatry is not the Christian response.

Idolatry calls for revisionist history,
truncated truth,

willful forgetfulness and selective memory in the service of self.

Textual and narrative proof-texting is required to create a narrative in support of our idols.

Unquestioned loyalty to institutions, ideologies and systems deadens our brains and hardens our hearts. Our emotional, psychic and communal energies are spent, not in building inclusive communities of love but in defending our self-interests, and thereby, our idols.

I remind you, we have been taught a better way. Hear again the words of our Lord.

John 8:31ff ³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³They answered him, "We are Americans^[a] and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" ³⁴Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

I am proud to be a citizen of this country. I love to read the stories of our founders, of the lives and experiences that have shaped us as a country.

But I struggle with my own citizenship and feel too-often inadequate in the face of the challenges we have.

I slip into diatribes and behave badly (usually in the privacy of my car and home) toward folks with whom I disagree.

I label people unfairly..., well, sometimes fairly.

Sometimes my anxiety pushes me into idolatry.

Sometimes, I simply sell out because I don't have the energy or the will to resist.

But I know a better way. And that is why it is important that I first anchor my identity in a confession rather than a constitution. Our first allegiance is to our citizenship in the Kingdom of God. In God we find the strength to face the unknown,

to live with ambiguity,

to work for good, and

to not sell our souls to easy answers and idols that seduce us.

We rise up in this place with a prophetic voice to proclaim that no institution should compromise the freedom and equality made available to all people through their origin and destiny in God through Christ.

I pray that God will indeed bless this country and its citizens, and God bless Haiti, and God bless Nepal, and God bless Afghanistan, and God bless Iran, the Congo, Iraq,...

May God bless America, not because we deserve it more than others,

but because we need it as much as anyone.

Bless us so that we may be a blessing to others, not through colonialism and imperialism, but through selfless service.

Our declaration of Freedom remains a confessional one – **Jesus is Lord.**

May it be so.

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Some helpful references

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