

## Called to Freedom

If you are like me, you were probably on edge early Saturday evening when you heard the news that the United States had bombed three nuclear sites in Iran. And yet, by Tuesday after a rocky start, Israel and Iran agreed to a cease fire. With Iran's nuclear capacity severely damaged, the world felt a sigh of relief that the "Twelve Day War" had ended.

Who knows what the future holds for the Middle East? Iran remains a belligerent nation, but one thing is clear: the cessation of hostilities would not have been possible without the United States. As NATO recognized this past week, America remains the last best hope for peace and freedom in the world.

This Friday we Americans celebrate our 249<sup>th</sup> year of independence. Who would have imagined back in 1776 that thirteen colonies would become the world's pre-eminent superpower?

There are many reasons for America's strength and influence in the world, but most important is our country's commitment to freedom. The very first rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights are freedom of religion, speech, and association. The name given to our nation in the closing phrase of the Star-Spangled Banner is "the land of the free." We in America enjoy enormous freedom compared to every other nation on earth: economic freedom, political freedom, religious freedom, personal freedom, and communal freedom. We enjoy the freedom to choose, freedom to learn, freedom to speak, freedom to worship, freedom to be different, freedom to protest and even say outrageous things without government recrimination.

Where did we get this love of freedom? America is grounded in biblical faith tempered by the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. At the heart of biblical faith is a commitment to freedom.

In the Old Testament from the time God sent Moses to deliver the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to the time God brought back the Hebrews from the Babylonian captivity, God is revealed as a "let-my-people-go" kind of God.

The same is true of the New Testament. Jesus announced freedom as the purpose of his life when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18). Jesus proclaimed freedom to be the focus of his ministry when he said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Paul declared freedom to be the consequence of Jesus' death and resurrection when he said, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

Freedom, of course, demands responsibility. As the Founders of our country knew so well, only a moral people can be a free people. For freedom to thrive, we must fulfill our duties as responsible citizens: we must vote, pay taxes, comply with laws, respect

property, demonstrate loyalty, and uphold peace. Despite the list of the works of the flesh versus the fruit of the Spirit that St. Paul enumerates in our lesson from Galatians, he takes care to preface these traits with a single reminder: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14).

Freedom and responsibility, love of neighbor and love of country are at the core of our nation’s character, but they raise some probing questions that I want us to consider this morning.

**Question Number One: Do we believe in freedom enough to allow others to have it?**

This is where the United States is different from Iran, China, Russia, and North Korea, and even many Western democracies. It is one thing to grant freedom to those who think and believe like us, but what of those who do not? Are we prepared to grant them the same freedom we want for ourselves? This is what makes “a free people” free.

Freedom demands that we accept people’s right to believe and behave as they choose. Whether we agree with their choices or endorse their personal preferences is not the issue. The issue is whether we are prepared to give people permission to think and behave differently from ourselves provided they don’t hurt or threaten others. Americans have every right to pursue the change they want – in elections, in the courts, in the state legislatures and in Congress. We can advocate, protest, work to change laws, and vote politicians in or out of office, so long as we respect the rule of law and do it peacefully.

In Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*, there is a conversation between Sir Thomas More and his son-in-law William Roper. They are talking about Richard Rich who is a despicable, self-serving human being working for Chancellor Thomas Cromwell whose only moral principle is power.

More says that Rich has done nothing illegal, but Roper objects, saying it is only a technicality, since Rich is morally bad. The conversation continues:

Roper: “So now you give the Devil the benefit of law!”

More: “Yes! What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?”

Roper: “Yes, I’d cut down every law in England to do that!”

More: “Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, Man’s laws, not God’s! And if you cut them down..., do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I’d give the Devil the benefit of law, for my own safety’s sake!”

Thomas More understood that freedom for others is freedom for us. Get rid of the laws, ignore the laws, violate the laws, for what we think is some justifiable purpose, and we

lose all safety for ourselves. Thomas More was right: “I’d give the Devil the benefit of law, for my own safety’s sake!”

Do we believe in freedom enough to allow others to have it? Then we must oppose denying the rights of others in our zeal for a more perfect society, for in denying their rights we risk our own. Conformity is the enemy of freedom.

**Question Number Two: Do we believe in freedom enough to affirm a faith that allows it?** When you take the element of freedom out of the expression of faith, then you move away from biblical faith, for biblical faith involves free choice. A faith that is forced upon another person is never genuine faith.

Christian theologians make the distinction between two types of freedom. Most basic is the freedom to choose and make decisions. Human beings, unlike other creatures, have the power of choice, the ability to choose one thing over another. The “pursuit of happiness” in our Declaration of Independence presupposes that human beings have the freedom to choose a way of life that works for them provided their beliefs, values and lifestyles are not in conflict with the common good. That’s why people may live and believe differently but still be good citizens.

In addition to the freedom to choose, there is moral freedom. This is the freedom that chooses according to God’s will, the freedom to choose what is right, and good and true. freedom, which is lifegiving and leads to genuine health and happiness. The Christian Church is the agent of this freedom, and the role of the Church in a free society is to persuade and teach people that moral freedom leads to happy lives and a vibrant nation.

However, the Church cannot compel people to choose moral freedom. We can’t force people to do what we think is right, good, and true. The choice must be left to the individual. The Church can and should make its case, explain and defend Christian faith, and raise our voice for what we believe to be the right way, but in the end, we must respect the conscience of people to choose for themselves, even if it is different from ours.

Before COVID, I enjoyed browsing books at Barnes and Noble. I don’t do that very much now since I tend to get most of my books through Amazon or other booksellers on the web. Still, in-person browsing has merit, and I will often find a book that catches my attention.

There are thousands of books in any Barnes and Noble store, including ones on philosophy, religion, politics, history, science, and sociology. Inevitably I will come across books that I think are flat out wrong, misguided, tasteless, or even offensive. But would I want to ban those books simply because I disagree with them? No – not even books that attack Christianity.

How can I be so tolerant of ideas with which I disagree? Well, I ask myself, “How does God treat us?” The realization that God does not force himself on us – does not compel us to believe but gives us the freedom to choose – encourages me to respect the choices of others so long as those choices do not hurt other human beings.

Real freedom is about respecting individuals to live their own lives. Only such freedom enables biblical faith. If we truly support freedom, we must reject coercion, which demands uniform expression of faith, and thus opposes freedom.

**Question Number Three: Do we believe in freedom enough to make sacrifices for it?**

On July 3, 1776, the day before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, George Washington wrote a letter to his wife, anticipating the hardships that would occur. Here in part are his words:

“In a few days, you will see a Declaration setting forth the causes which have impelled us to this mighty revolution and the reasons which will justify it in the sight of God. I am fully aware of the toil, blood, and treasure that it will cost to maintain this declaration and support and defend these states; yes, through all the gloom, I can see the rays of ravishing light and glory.”

The next day fifty-six representatives of the thirteen colonies signed the Declaration of Independence and pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor as the United States of America. They would not betray that pledge, even when several of them died or went bankrupt because of the war. Five signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army, and another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or the hardships of war. All of them believed freedom was a treasure beyond price and even worth their lives.

That spirit of sacrifice, the willingness to pay the price to keep the flame of freedom bright, has continued in this country to the present time. It’s what keeps America free – people who sacrifice and even lay down their lives for a cause greater than them.

Many of us know that the late Senator John McCain spent five-and-one-half years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He told of his fellow prisoner Lt. Commander Mike Christian. Mike had collected scraps of white and red cloth and had sewed the scraps together into an American flag. He then sewed this makeshift flag to the inside of his blue pajama top. The men would hang Mike’s pajama top on a wall each night and say the pledge of allegiance to it. That ritual brought them together and reminded them of their purpose.

One day, the guards happened to catch the men saying the pledge. They dragged Mike away and beat him brutally. But that very night when Mike returned to his cell, he began gathering pieces of cloth again. He was already starting on another flag.

We may never be called to make the sacrifice Lt. Mike Christian made in that Vietnamese prison. But we can make sacrifices here at home to protect the nation, promote the common good, and ensure that every American lives in dignity, especially the weak, the poor and the marginalized. We can sacrifice to make our nation “a more perfect union” for all people. After all, when Christians practice love of neighbor, anything is possible.

Do we believe in freedom enough to make sacrifices for it? We must resist complacency, the tendency to take our freedom for granted, for complacency is the enemy of freedom.

Here then, are the three questions that all of us should ponder as we approach Independence Day:

- Do we believe in freedom enough to allow others to have it?
- Do we believe in freedom enough to affirm a faith that allows it?
- Do we believe in freedom enough to make sacrifices for it?

As we struggle with these questions, we understand what George Washington meant in his first Inaugural Address when he said, “It is a strenuous thing, this living the life of a free people.”

In this dangerous world, a free and moral people is the surest way for our nation to continue as a beacon of hope on earth. We Christians must oppose coercion in matters of faith. We must oppose conformity in religious, political, and social beliefs. We must oppose complacency in our lives, recognizing that freedom must constantly be won or it will eventually be lost. We must support freedom for all people, for as St. Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

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Text – Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Independence Day, Proper 8, C

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