

July 4 & 5, 2020
Message: Faith-filled Freedom
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Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.

¹² Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

¹³ For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴ or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶ As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

- 1 Peter 2:11-17

Beloved. The kind of word that it is used for the introductions of many ritualistic instances. If there is a very traditional wedding, “Dearly beloved, we gather together here in the sight of God to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony....” This same type of introduction can be used for a funeral as well... “Dearly beloved, we gather here today to celebrate the life of...” or “...mourn the loss of...” We may have heard Jesus say it many times to his disciples, depending on our translation. The author of 1 Peter also chooses to use this greeting before giving instruction to the recipients of this letter. But, “beloved” also has a deeper meaning. From earlier in this letter, the author reminds the hearers that by calling them “beloved”, they are called to love one another and have been called and chosen by God.

So today, to you out there watching, from the grace of God, welcome beloved.

As we listened to the scripture today, we may struggle with the culture gap. We live in a very different world than those who were receiving this message. Where those who listened to this message wished for Christians to be in places of power, we experience that every day. Whether or not we agree with our brothers and sisters, we have many who claim Christianity and are in great power in our government. This would have been something our listeners would have dreamed of.

Christians in the time of writing 1 Peter were despised among the pagans. Because of the call to abstain from fleshly desires, they were often separated from the rest of their society. To be a part of the change, a part of the power structure for change, would have meant a completely different system for many. Instead, all our early Christians had was the encouragement to conduct themselves honorably so they might not wage war on the soul.

This scripture also gives us great parallelism with the holiday weekend. 244 years we have spent being “free”. In 1776, 56 European immigrants represented 13 different self-claimed colonies and came together to form the Declaration of Independence separating themselves from what they believed to be their captors. Before this moment, there were many years of blood, sweat, and tears to get these individuals to a place of treason and change. It was a great celebration, yet it took 7 years before civilians celebrated the holiday. In fact, the city of civilians who celebrated 7 years later was noted by their Moravian Church. The celebration of a momentous day where it seemed the wage of war on the soul was over. Religious freedom was gained.

But that's not all the scripture today points us to. Beginning in verse 13 and carrying through chapter 3 of 1 Peter, we are invited to look at what it means to “conduct [ourselves] honorably”. While we may only look at a section of what 1 Peter shares, we are given plenty to think about.

1 Peter's honorability is first portrayed through obedience. The reader is told "*For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution*". Wow! That's a bold statement. It gets more interesting though. The actual Greek translation tells us that "human institution" more accurately translates to "person". We are asked by this author to "*accept the authority of every human person.*" How can someone accept authority of all human institutions or persons when all are different?

In ancient times, all leaders, emperors, governors, politicians, and all in leadership promoted good order, so it was to the advantage of Christians to be subject to them. All leaders, emperors, governors, politicians, and leadership promote good order, right? All work together to make sure that everyone is agreeable to one another. They didn't in ancient times either.

Did you laugh at that statement and question, or even possibly swear? No matter where we sit on the political spectrum, we don't always agree with decisions that are made. We don't always see decisions as being just or in good order at any point in time in our history. Still, we are to be subject to our figures as part of our Christian freedom. Part Christian freedom is freedom to do what is right, not what is wrong. And doing what is right includes being properly submissive to governing authorities.

We see a most drastic contrast though in the actions of some of our great leaders including theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. People like him remind us that sometimes Christian freedom means freedom from society's rules, and not merely freedom to obey willingly. We are told in our scripture, "¹⁶*As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.*" When we see evil, how do we stand aside from society's rules? How do we balance the two? God is calling us to two different opposites.

It may even be difficult for us to see where we are called to be different from society's rules. Sometimes it takes us years to understand where society's rules fail and where we as Christians need to step in. Only recently did I find out that the Emancipation Proclamation did not free all slaves. It took the U.S. until 1865 (89 years after "all men were created equal") to abolish slavery. No wonder Frederick Douglass, an American social reformer and statesman, in 1852 found the celebration of the 4th of July and the celebration of "justice, liberty, prosperity and independence" to be offensive to those who had none of those things. Douglass saw where society's rules failed and where there was a need to call the truth to light and encourage change. Where do we see a call today to call the truth to light and encourage change even with our celebration of freedom?

Ultimately even though we are challenged to obey when there is good order and challenge where social rules fail, we are given hope in this challenge because of who Jesus is.

This scriptural letter gives us hope, just like it did for the Christians in that time. Their hope was that Christians around Turkey would not have to worry about slander and would in fact change the lives of those who persecuted them. The early Christians also hoped that they would live lives that would honor God. The true realization comes when all Christians realize that influencing the world, taking on admiration as God's people will not be an easy task.

We may be treated and feel sometimes like we are aliens in our own places for the ways we give hope to the soul, but we do make an impact and we honor God when we live for God.

So, we must ask ourselves: Are we joyful because the values that we carry as Christians always are shown through our culture? If we answer no, how are we called to have our culture reflect our faith?

We have a blessing as people of the United States of America to use the freedom that we have been given by God to express our faith. So, as we celebrate the 4th of July weekend, may we use the freedoms that we have to shape our culture for the glory of God.