

Sermon: "Independence and Abraham"

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Scripture: Genesis 15

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What does it mean to be Independent? What does it mean to have freedom? Are these two concepts synonymous or is there a difference? Around the nation in which we live, people are celebrating Independence Day today. The Fourth of July is a day of celebration which is historically tied to the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776. Today is a day of parades and celebrations 245 years after this nation declared itself Independent from the British crown.

One sentence always sticks out to me from the 245 year old declaration: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." There's a certain amount of nostalgia tied to these words for me. I recall learning about these words in school, talking about their meaning in Boy Scouts, and hearing them read almost annually before firework celebrations. Hearing these words reminds me of a simpler time.

There's also a certain amount of intellectual and spiritual dissonance that captures my attention. Were these words truly as inclusive as my imagination would remember? Were women welcome to grasp such unalienable rights? Were people welcome to claim such rights if they had different skin tones or if they held a less popular religion? There's an intellectual dissonance when I hear these words.

There's also a spiritual dissonance generated by these words. The scriptures generally uphold the right of people to live and the scriptures

do not demand that anyone should stop seeking happiness. If there's a dissonance between the lifestyle promoted and the experience of the faithful over the millennia, it is not with the concept of a right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

There may be a dissonance between the example of faithful people in the scriptures and the unalienable right to liberty. Liberty is sometimes defined as the "ability or scope to act as one pleases." Liberty can also be defined as a people or state's freedom from foreign governance. The Declaration of Independence says that humanity has a right to liberty, but what definition of liberty is claimed historically? What definition of liberty is claimed today?

While the Declaration of Independence was declaring liberty from the British crown, there's a strong segment of humanity that sees the liberty defined as an unalienable right in this Declaration to be a liberty that refers to the "ability or scope to act as one pleases" rather than the state of being free from foreign governance. No matter what the intention of the original founders of this nation, many celebrate liberty today without a care in the world about the British crown or while holding a grudge against the slights of foreign taxation.

In my own reading of the scriptures, I find spiritual dissonance between the idea of doing whatever one wishes and the spiritual life. The scriptures rarely (if ever) establish self-focused and self-gratifying behavior as normative for the people of God. A reading of the Hebrew scriptures involves the history and teachings of a people who lived within a monarchy bound by a system of religious law. The Hebrew scriptures in particular are focused upon a culture bound by a different understanding than our culture.

The scriptures are filled with the stories of monarchs who have the ability to act with freedom that were bound only by religious law. Alongside these monarchs the stories revolve around subjects that are bound to the rules of the monarchy and the temple. Few of the individuals in our story are truly free to act as they wish when we consider the societal and religious rules binding their behavior.

To find individuals that are truly free in a sense of having true liberty in our scriptures, we must go back to the stories of the first ancestors of the Hebrew faith. In the Book of Genesis, we see people who are free from governmental rule, society-wide religious expectations, and the oppressive powers of a foreign government. Figures like Eve, Adam, and Noah are free from the rule of others by definition. When there are no competing figures around, it is hard to consider how someone acts in relationship with others, so that independence is clearly different than an independence while living with others.

The truly free figures that we find in our scriptures are Sarah and Abraham. Abraham and his wife Sarah began their journey with God as Abram and Sarai. These figures came out of the land of Ur and were immigrants to a new portion of the Mediterranean world. Their tale begins with a journey into a new culture as wandering nomads who have no ties with the surrounding people. They live with no law binding them except the laws they chose to follow. They are truly free and have absolute liberty in terms of their lifestyle choices. As such, their faithful lives have been seen as praiseworthy and worthy of emulation.

This is where our challenge arises. The dissonance with the unalienable right to liberty comes from what Abraham and Sarah chose to do with their freedom and liberty. Our passage today tells us a story of covenant. God and Abraham come together during a moment

described at first as a vision, then as a covenant act, and finally as a dream. The text itself describes the act as an act of Covenant which is a binding contract between two individuals.

To truly understand the importance of that covenant, it is important to know a little bit of background about the actions occurring within the text. There was an ancient form of covenant known as a Suzerainty treaty. Effectively, this form of covenant was made between a lord and a vassal. The lord would provide for the vassal benefits and the vassal would promise fealty to the lord. In ancient culture, the covenant was often made with a sacrifice for two reasons: first, the sacrifice would please the deities bearing witness. Second, the sacrifice is a statement of intention. To put it bluntly, these animals have died and split in two: may it be the same for me if I break my promise.

A reading of the covenantal actions goes as follows. In our reading, God makes a promise to the vassal known as Abraham. God affirms a promise to give Abraham children and then declares that the land will be the land of Abraham's descendants. When Abraham asks how he knows it will be so, God instructs Abraham to lay out the bodies of a heifer, a ram, a goat, a turtledove, and a pigeon. As the night begins, Abraham protects the sacrifice. As night falls deeply, a promise is made to Abraham. Abraham's descendants will have the land, Abraham will pass in peace, and the promise will be fulfilled despite a delay of generations. In this moment, smoke and fire (both symbols of divinity) pass between the sacrifices and the covenant is struck.

In other words, when we come across the story of some of the few truly free figures within the scriptures, those figures use their liberty to choose to enter into a covenant with God. When they receive God's blessings, they receive those blessings while entering into a relationship that connects them with God forever. Abraham, one of the

figures who is revered within both Judaism and Christianity, uses his liberty, trusts God, is reckoned righteous, and enters into a binding covenant with God. Abraham effectively surrenders his autonomy by choice. Abraham doesn't revel in liberty and self-satisfaction: Abraham surrenders liberty for the sake of being in a relationship with God.

Interestingly, our scriptures provide other stories of people who have independence to a lower degree. When the kings of Israel chose to follow God, they generally prospered. When they chose to do their own thing outside of the covenant, they generally suffered. When the judges and prophets acted on behalf of the covenant, the people who listened and obeyed tended to succeed. When the people ignored the messengers and leaders of the covenant, the people suffered.

There's a covenantal nature to a lot of our religious beliefs that prioritizes covenant over liberty. While there is no guarantee that things will always be perfect, there is an understanding that we are expected to live in right relationship with God and neighbor. Jesus Himself taught that the two most important commandments are to love God with all of ourselves and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are not called to love God with what is convenient or to love our neighbor as long as it pleases us. We are called to the covenantal love of God and the covenantal love with respect for our neighbors. Jesus' words were not a call to liberty: they were a call to a right relationship with those around us.

In truth, as Christians, we can easily celebrate today. The Declaration of Independence was founded upon the reality that the government of the colonies was neither respectful nor loving. Things had strained to a breaking point between the colonies and the crown: when the relationship broke it broke because things were neither healthy nor holy. We can celebrate that such a broken relationship was brought to

an end, which eventually allowed for a more respectful relationship. Indeed, when national independence is used well, it can benefit everyone within a nation and around a nation. The potential for blessing is a reason for celebration.

We can celebrate, but the call to liberty is only a great call to freedom when we understand our need to fulfill our covenant responsibilities. We have the liberty to act as we will in this world, but as Christians we live in relationship with a God who calls us to live holy lives marked by love of God and neighbor. Our relationship with God comes with expectations that are holy and healthy. We may not embrace absolute liberty to do whatever crosses our mind, but we do embrace God's goodness and trust that God will lead us in healthy ways of living.

One place where we find an example of that healthy way of life is at the communion table. When we approach the table, we approach the table of Christ. The bread we break and the cup we drink are shared by the hands of someone whose life set the example of living in covenant. A few short hours after the sharing of bread and cup with His disciples, Jesus would kneel in a garden and express sorrow in prayer. When Jesus asks God to take the cup of suffering away, Jesus is an example of the covenantal commitment of the faithful. Christ prays in Luke 22:42, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done."

Christ's example was to live in relationship with God and neighbor while seeking God's will in all circumstances. Even in such difficult moments, Jesus did not seek liberty from challenge or consequence: Christ lived with a purpose greater than momentary gain or pleasure. In seeking God's will, Christ made the way for an eternal liberty from something far worse than a British crown. In Christ's death and resurrection the way was set for us to be eternally free from sin and

death. In other words, if we are in pursuit of liberty, the freedom we seek is an eternal freedom from our own brokenness.

As we transition into communion this morning, I would challenge all of us to spend some time today considering our own pursuit of freedom. What are we seeking in this life and why? Are we given the gifts of life and free will for the pursuit of something meaningful? What is that purpose in your life?

Let us pray...