

# The Revolution Then and Now

## Independence Day Weekend

*Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 33:10-17; Matthew 5:38-48*

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### *Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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On this Independence Day weekend, I invite you to think with me about our nation, especially in the present circumstance of our post-9/11 world. It is always appropriate to reflect on the good fortune we have enjoyed - the privileges that we have enjoyed together as a people, as a nation. What a heritage we have entered into. What marvelous freedoms and liberty have we lived with. What advantages have we had. What a glorious vision was that vision that founded a constitutional democracy and all of those things that down through the last two centuries and more have made the American experiment. And an experiment it is. In that heroic document with its great language, the *Declaration of Independence*, we read of self-evident truths and of inalienable rights. But, as a matter of fact, the truths of the vision upon which this nation was founded are not at all self-evident, and the rights that we claim are not at all inalienable human rights. As a matter of fact, only a small minority of humankind has ever enjoyed them as we have, and those rights as documented in our founding documents are rights that even, at the time of their affirmation, were affirmed and appreciated by only a minority. But what a marvelous nation this has been in which to be able to pursue our happiness. And how grateful we should be for that privilege that has been ours.

I did a little rummaging around this week thinking about this moment in order to understand how such a nation could have been born, and it is all the stuff that we learned in American History 101, but we forget, and so I had to refresh my memory. It was about ten years before the Revolutionary War ever began that the difficulties between Mother England and these colonies began to heat up. It is so typical, such a typical human story: England of empire, England of king and crown, and these thirteen bedraggled colonies with no national government, no army, no legislative body, really a confederation of colonies, and Mother England began to twist the arm just a bit. They had been rather exhausted emotionally and financially through the French and Indian War. They had not paid a great deal of attention to these colonies. These colonies became rather independent-minded, and when England caught its breath and began to feel that it should maintain

certain situations and conditions here, and to raise enough finances to enhance the imperial treasury, of course, the sparks began to fly.

These were people from a common tradition, they spoke a common language and, as you go back and read about those events, one wonders that there wasn't someone there able to sit them down together and to talk together, because it was obvious that the human ego was flying high, that there was a battle of wills that was building up, and, human animals that we are, someone will either back down and submit and become submissive, or the clash is inevitable. So, the sugar tax, three pennies on every pound of molasses imported, a very costly tax for these colonies that were apparently importing a lot of molasses to produce a lot of great rum.

And the tea business, the East India Tea Company, unhappy about the fact that tea was not being consumed as it should have been with a boycott at work. It all comes down to rum and profits eventually, doesn't it? And so, we have that sterling episode of the Boston Tea Party and all of those great events, and as you read it, you can remember, perhaps, if you are as old as I am, how those old history books used to make you thrill to the story of the Revolution.

I suppose it is fruitless at this point to raise the questions as to whether or not it ever should have happened, but I think it is important for us to be reminded of the fact that there was a time when this nation was being born, that Mother England, the King and the Crown, were calling us terrorists and that we became violent in our pursuit of freedom and liberty. And it is good for us to remember that, as someone has said, one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist.

At that time, we were weak and poor and ungoverned, and so we didn't have a great deal to lose and let it all go, and when you are fighting for your homeland and for a future, when your blood is running fast, then, of course, what can the imperial forces do against you? But we did get involved in war and thousands of lives were lost and there was tragedy in thousands of homes, and from all of that has emerged this great nation and it is fruitless, as I said a moment ago, to contemplate the question as to whether or not it was a good thing. Certainly it would seem that it could have been settled in some other way without bloodshed, but that is the human story, isn't it?

So, we have a great heritage and we have enjoyed great privileges beyond comparison. But, there was a time when we did resort to violence in order to realize our dream. And it is probably important to remember that. I entitled the message "The Revolution Then and Now" because, although it was a local contest, geographically limited, happening in a small corner of the world, nonetheless it was a revolution and the revolution today is a global revolution, and all of the dimensions of it have changed drastically. But, as a matter of fact, that dream in the human heart which we pursued even with violence is a dream not so far from the human heart of earth children around the globe. The times have progressed

and technology has progressed and the world has become as small as a grapefruit, and we live in a global village today in which it is no longer possible for something which happens in one little corner not to affect the whole. And so, what do we do in this moment of our own crisis? This moment when our freedoms and our way of life and our peace are being challenged and disturbed? How well are we reacting to the revolution now?

Well, if we were still those thirteen colonies without any power or prestige or position in the world, it would be a very simple thing for me to preach to you today. I would remind you what the Psalmist said, although his conception of God is one which I cannot adopt anymore: God looking down and sort of smiling at the machinations of humankind. Nonetheless, there was an insight way back there, millennia ago, when the Psalmist said, "An army cannot save and a warhorse is vain hope for salvation or victory." Even then the Psalmist knew that that which is effected by force affects nothing, finally. If we were just the thirteen colonies and a nondescript people on the face of the earth, I'd point you to Isaiah 42. It is one of the servant songs. In those middle chapters of Isaiah, there are several poems called the *Servant Poems*. One of them is Isaiah 53. But the one read a moment ago in chapter 42 is about the servant who will bring justice to the land, and he will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick. In other words, with tenderness and compassion, the servant of the Lord will work at justice. The 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah speaks about this same servant who, as a lamb to the slaughter, is led away to die. You say, "Nice image. Great hope. Happy motivation for us to follow in his steps."

But, Jesus followed in the steps of the servant. We feel that it was those servant songs that shaped Jesus, and if we were just thirteen colonies of a nondescript people, I would preach from the Sermon on the Mount about moving away from that system of justice that said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, moving away from the natural animosity and hostility against the enemy to a love for the enemy, an emulation of God who causes the rain to fall on the garden of the just and the unjust and causes the sun to shine on all God's children. Because, you see, in God's view there aren't any enemies. We make enemies one of another, but God has a problem. God is the God of all people, and so what does God do? Rain falls on the gardens of both sides. Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, brought an uncharacteristic humility to the office of the presidency, an uncharacteristic sensitivity and spirituality, and in his second inaugural address, he recognized the fact that both sides in that bitter struggle in the Civil War read the same Bible and prayed to the same God.

So, Jesus said love your enemies, be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect, but perfect is not a good word. A better word is mature. Or, in Luke's rendering of the Sermon on the Mount, it is be compassionate as your father in heaven is compassionate.

If we were just ordinary folks like the rest of the world without a great deal of power or responsibility, I could preach those things and you could hear those things and say, "Sure, that's good."

Obviously, might does not make right. Obviously, military force does not create heaven on earth. Obviously, the world needs justice and it ought to be done with compassion and tenderness. And sure, loving one's enemies is a better way to go, Jesus. Even though it did lead to a cross. But, you see, the problem is that is not who we are.

I've never particularly cared for Jesse Jackson. The last time I confessed that publicly, somebody gave me a book by him, so you don't need to do that. But, one of our alumni from Christ Community, Jim Dykehouse, sent me this from a Chicago paper, Jesse Jackson to Yassar Arafat, an Open Letter. It's one of the finest things I've read on this whole situation. Speaking about the Palestinian-Israeli situation, Jesse Jackson writing to Arafat says,

Terrorist attacks can destroy, but they cannot build. They can generate fear, but not hope. They can revenge past injury, but cannot rebuild future prospects. In the end, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves everyone blind and toothless and bloody."

A little later, he says,

"Non-violence establishes the moral legitimacy of your cause. Non-violence requires discipline and training. It speaks to hope for the future, not hate of the past. It engages the young, not in individual acts of despair, but in collective actions of hope. Terror bombings appall the world community. Non-violent resistance will engage that community and force it to respond. Palestinian statehood and Israeli security are two sides of the same coin. The one cannot exist without the other. Terror bombings generate hatred, fear and distrust and insecurity. Non-violent resistance recognizes the humanity of your opponents. It challenges their moral sensibility, but not their military capacity. It forces them to recognize your humanity and because it demonstrates your discipline, your commitment, your love of life, it lays the basis for co-existence rather than co-annihilation. Non-violence is not passive suffering. It is an action strategy. It actively resists repression. It actively challenges the occupier. It actively disrupts business as usual. Non-violence is not a coward's path. Non-violent demonstrators must face anger, violent responses, beatings, jailing and worse, and be disciplined enough not to respond in kind. For the Palestinians, non-violence may be the only road to statehood now. It would demonstrate the nobility of your people and the justice of your cause."

If we were just thirteen colonies, without cutting a great swath in the world, I could preach Jesse Jackson's advice to you. If we were just an ordinary people, I

would know what to say to you. But, we're not. We're the world's one super power. We're the greatest nation on earth in terms of our military might. We can act unilaterally. We can force our will. We can devastate any nation we choose to. We are limited somewhat by world opinion, of course, but not by what we can do, if we would do it. We use the Bible often in our political rhetoric, but won't you have to grant me that most of that appeal to God and the scriptures is simply that - political rhetoric? And isn't it ironic that those who pledge the greatest allegiance to the Bible are the very people who are marked by a militant spirit, by some kind of sense that this nation is God's chosen vessel for the evangelization of the world and, therefore, we can do anything in God's name for God's cause because it is bringing in God's kingdom?

Somehow or other, the game has changed on us. Even as recently as World War II, a great evil could be confronted and dealt with. But, the game has changed. The enemy has become almost invisible and the ability to attack insidious, and our most visible and powerful weapon systems are impotent against the crisis we face today.

If we were just an ordinary people, I would recommend the way of Jesus. But, it's really foolish preacher talk to recommend that way to the most powerful nation on earth for, in spite of the fact that we claim the scriptures as the source, the vision of our Western civilization, we know there are limits. And so, what do we say to ourselves as this great nation that we are?

I really believe in the American people. I believe in the goodness of the American people. I believe, if you scratch the surface of the average American, you will find a good heart and a good intention and a desire for peace and well-being. But, we get all caught up in empire. We get all caught up in our economic prerogatives. We get all caught up in the privileges of being number one, and when you are on the top of the heap, why in the world would you give your life away? When you are ruling the world, why would you yield up your authority and your power? If you are the United States of America, the last thing in the world you want to do, if you're smart, is tangle with Jesus, because it just does not make sense. It cuts against the grain of our animal nature.

And so, I don't know what to preach if I can't preach Jesus. Or, should I assume that there really is that goodness down beneath the surface of the vast majority of our country's people? Should I assume that if someone should rise up and suggest that what we really need is not the reorganization of our security system, because in all honesty, there is no security, that what we really need is not the enhancement of our defense budget, for a military response is a vain hope for victory, to paraphrase the Psalmist. Would I dare believe that if someone arose who dared to suggest that what we really need is a new national vision and a new national purpose, that the people might follow?

To my knowledge, what we did after the Second World War was unprecedented, and the nations of Germany and Japan were re-created as strong and vital and

healthy societies, because, in a sense, we loved the enemy. What would happen today if, rather than declaring our independence, we acknowledged our *interdependence* with all earth children? And rather than declaring the superiority of our way of life, of our religious perspective, we acknowledged that all peoples and traditions have their identity and their pride, and if we invited all together to sit down at the table in order that we might understand one another's traditions and discover the sources of violence and injustice that are there, in order that in all traditions we might come to see that, at base, all of them point to God as the source of life, of humane existence.

What would happen if, rather than mounting our power and asserting our rights, we really followed Jesus?