

Freedom and Commitment in a Global Society

Independence Day Weekend

Text: Galatians 5:13

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Not in every worship would such a mellow tenor be able to sing "America" so beautifully. There are liturgical purists in the Church who feel that civil holidays have no place in the celebration and the worship of the people of God, and, of course, there is a point to guard the worship of the Church. It can get ridiculous, you know. I mean, a sermon on celebrating Girl Scout cookies would be stretching it a bit. But, after all, as the people of God, we are also people of a nation and you cannot divorce the experience of your religious existence from your existence as a citizen. We are a part of a nation and of a civilization and our religious vision has shaped that civilization and been shaped by it, as well, and I do believe there is a place, at least with some of the more important civil holidays, to bring a reflection into the experience of worship, to celebrate the blessings that have been ours as a nation. I think it is not at all out of place to recognize the heritage that is ours with gratitude and to place that heritage and that experience in the light of the word of God in order to see how we're doing with it and how responsibly we are exercising the privilege of it. And so, for just a few moments this morning, I want you to think with me about this nation, about our heritage. I want to do it with affirmation and with gratitude, for we do celebrate a very, very great national heritage and civilizational tradition.

We are a people of the United States of America; we are people of the West, of western civilization, and we have a heritage that has been richly blessed of God. I don't have to say that certainly it is a flawed vision and we have failed often, not living up to our ideals in great measure and in many respects. Nonetheless, we are a fortunate people and it is good to celebrate that and to remember it. Civil holidays do sometimes stretch the ability of the preacher to find a relevant text because the texts of the scriptures really do not address the kinds of things that we will be reflecting on this morning, and yet I think, for example, in the Prophet Isaiah, the 58th chapter, we do have that which we can bring into our own experience. Before the verses which I read, the people are complaining to God. They're saying, "We're very religious. We do all of our liturgies and sacrifices and rituals and you don't seem to take note of us." And the scripture lesson began with that question, "Is this the fast that I desire, says the Lord?" In other words,

do I want all kinds of religious rigamarole? Do I need the smoke of your incense, the fragrance of your sacrifices? Do I need your obeisance and your devotion? Show me your devotion in a life committed to justice and compassion. Unshackle the prisoner and feed the hungry and clothe the naked and give the homeless shelter. Then, then the light will rise upon you. Then you'll call and I'll answer. Then you will be a repairer of ancient foundations, standing in the breach, affecting renewal. Religion has an end in itself. It is not at all what God desires or intends. Religious devotion is to result in fair and compassionate action.

Paul in the letter to the Galatians is dealing with what we might say is a theological matter, a matter of grace as over against the performance principle. Specifically in this case, the question of circumcision, the Jewish rite of initiation, but that's not so important. The important thing that Paul is dealing with is the fact that we are set free from that heavy obligation, that onerous task of religious duty, and we don't come to God through all of our clap trap of religious practice and observance, beautiful as it may be in some cases, boring as it is in many cases, but rather, we come to God by the grace of God. We are set free, but we are set free, Paul says, not for self-indulgence, but for commitment to the other, to love. Set free to love. Set free to love in very concrete fashion, to live a life of commitment out of the freedom with which Christ has set us free.

So, I think in the biblical perspective, you do have what I want to say this morning about our responsibility as a nation who has been so richly blessed. I want to say that we are called in our freedom to commitment in a global society, a world so far different than the world into which this nation was born, and yet a world that needs so desperately the blessings that we have received and the insights and the understanding and the wisdom that have marked our Western tradition. So, I want to say just a few things about that, and I want to begin simply by affirmation of our Western tradition, of our heritage, our national heritage as the United States of America. What a wonderful tradition it is. What a wonderful heritage it is. What a treasure it is, and how fruitful it has become in our midst, and how richly blessed we are as a people. I think there is every reason for the people of God gathered in worship to give God thanks and to reflect upon and celebrate that tradition, that civilizational track in which we find ourselves having emerged. Human dignity, the rights of the individuals, of liberal capitalism which has given us economic prosperity, human rights, although certainly not spread far enough, broad enough, completely enough to enough of God's children. Nonetheless, we know better. We know the ideal.

We have the rule of law, a society under the rule of law; the Elian Gonzalez case tested that. Emotions got in the way and a tragic fiasco resulted, but finally the rule of law. Apart from the rule of law, it's chaos. One can change the law, but one lives under the law. All of those aspects of a national experience have been for us a source of very rich blessing, indeed, and something for which certainly we thank God. We have a national heritage that is a part of the Western civilization that is rooted in Israel, that great prophetic tradition, a little taste of that this

morning from Isaiah, rooted in Greek philosophical thought, that rich, rich cultural flourishing in those centuries before Christ, and in Rome a model of governance and law. Israel, Greece, Rome flowing into Europe, experiencing the Renaissance, the coming to flower of the human being, the recognition of the human being, the throwing off of all authoritarianism, and the development therefore of critical rationality and the Enlightenment, and all of that opening up the possibility of modernity which has brought us where we are today, not only with our freedom, not only with our prosperity, but with the technological breakthroughs - the Genome Project, the mapping of human DNA, the possibilities that will break forth in the future, in the near future, which will boggle our mind, a globe tied together intimately through the Internet, a world that is absolutely amazing.

It is so amazing that people get scared. It is so fast and rapidly changing with so much potential, that a lot of people will run into the shelter of fundamentalist religious trying to stave off tomorrow and turn back the clock. But it is a world that has absolutely flowered out of that Western tradition from Israel and Greece and Rome, through Europe, Renaissance, and the U.S. of A., and we stand today as the guardians and the guarantors of that precious heritage. It is no mean thing. It is a great gift. It has given us so much and it has ongoing potential for the well-being and the good of the world.

But, having said that, I want to say that, while it is unique, it is not universal. By that I mean that in this global society that has become so small and intimately connected, it ought not occur to us to export our Western civilization globally. There are great civilizational groupings that make up the human family and half a dozen or so, all of them shaped initially, intimately by a religious vision. Again, ours informed by Christianity coming out of the womb of Judaism,

Greek philosophy, Roman law, but so with the Asian civilizations, so with the Orthodox countries, the Muslim civilizations - these respective civilizations are so deeply rooted. They are deeply rooted in blood and ethnicity and it far transcends allegiance to an idea or an ideal; it far transcends a national border, a nation state. What we have to recognize today is that the West is not the best for the rest. It is ours, and we ought to celebrate it and we ought to seek its renewal and we ought to preserve it and enhance it in every way we can, but we live in a global situation where our civilization must be understood as unique and not universal. To claim it is universal is simply false. That can be documented. And it is immoral.

If we were to export Western civilization globally, it would take military might. It would take enforcement in its institution and in its maintenance. It would take that old imperialism that marked the 19th century when Europe had hegemony over the rest of the globe, or in the 20th century in the dominance of our own particular nation. We could do it for a time through the imposition of power, but it is immoral and it would be dangerous because in the long run it wouldn't work,

because in the long run, coercion is overthrown by that which is more deeply rooted in the human spirit. And so, we are unique but we are not universal; we ought not to be. Therefore, what we need to do is reject mono-culturalism which would see the globe as marked by just one culture, and also multi-culturalism.

Now, that may surprise you because you know me as a bleeding heart liberal, and I have to say that I have been inclined to multi-culturalism because, after all, one ought to respect diversity and respect differences. But one must recognize that our founding fathers saw diversity as a problem, and to meet that problem, they had the little Latin phrase, *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one. The typical old, classic symbol for that was the melting pot. A New Testament scholar whom I deeply respect, Krister Stendahl, who has been here with us, Bishop Stendahl says that in the melting pot, you have to recognize that the dominant culture wins. You sort of assimilate everything into the dominant culture, and that's true, and I think we have to be very sensitive about that. He suggests rather than a melting pot, we have a salad bowl, where you have the various ingredients maintaining their own identity. But, however you do it, what we have to recognize is that multi-culturalism will deny, and therefore destroy, the uniqueness of Western civilization, which is not universal, which is not for everyone, but which has a heritage, a wisdom, and a fruitful tradition with which we ought not play fast and loose.

No mono-culturalism, no multi-culturalism, but a recognition of the uniqueness among the diversities of civilization, and then a mining of that heritage and that tradition for its best. And then recognizing that those qualities and those virtues are biblically rooted in the Hebrew tradition, expressed in the Christian tradition, reinforced by Greece and Rome. We ought to know who we are; we ought to know the pit from which we've been hewn, and we ought to recognize its value and do everything we can to make it better and to make it a part, a gleaming part, one of the facets of the global reality.

And then, I would say this, too - because of the position of power that we have, it is absolutely incumbent upon us to bear the burden for the rest of the world. It is incumbent upon us, the U.S. of A., to bear the burden and the cost of implementing a peaceful world. We need to do this by recognizing our uniqueness among the diversity, rejecting the mono-culturalism and the multi-culturalism, and then doing what we can in a world such as we see before us to accommodate the respective civilizational groupings. We need to do this through the energy and the resources that are ours, recognizing that it will be incumbent upon us to take the lead, to yield, to compromise, and back down. It's always the responsibility of the one in power to yield and to give way, to be sensitive because in a position of dominance such as we have, if we don't do that, we will incite a backlash which can be read almost anywhere around the globe today. They love the golden arches of McDonald's, the world loves the economic prosperity, the world loves all of the gadgets and the toys and the affluence, but they don't want us dictating their civilizational ways, and we need to recognize that a world which

is diverse will always be diverse, and therefore needs accommodation, needs somebody who has the power who will give up the power here and there in order to make the whole thing work. Paul Schroeder, a retired history professor from the University of Illinois, says a peaceful world has resulted when there has been a dominant power that is benign, that is able to use its power in a positive fashion, and the problem of such a world comes when that dominant power is either unable or unwilling to pay the cost. In such a case, there is incited a backlash or the rising of competing ideologies that finally will undermine that status quo, that peace that has been achieved.

I hear people grumble about all the billions of dollars that we ship overseas. Of course, we never stop to figure out that the beneficiary of all of that far beyond anyone else is ourselves. You hear Congressmen brag that they've hardly ever been out of this country. Someone of them said they didn't even own a passport. What kind of head-in-the-sand stupidity is that? You hear people thinking that you can turn the clock back, shut down movements like free trade and return to an isolationist kind of position. What kind of ignorance is that? And since we are in a position of such dominance and such power, it is incumbent upon us to be full of grace, full of integrity, to lead with generosity and with sensitivity. There is a good deal in this morning's scriptural passages about the pointing of the finger, the fighting and devouring of one another, added to the hostility and anger.

Did you happen to catch the little piece in the news last night about taking down the Confederate flag over the capital of South Carolina, only to raise it on a flagpole in the yard somewhere? You can have whatever position you want on that, but when I saw on the television screen the hatred and the meanness and hostility, I saw the violence of the human animal. I thought to myself, "Dear God, I wish I was preaching this morning where my friend John Richard DeWitt is preaching, within sight of the capital, First Presbyterian, Columbia, South Carolina." I think I could get excited about preaching there this morning.

But, you know, it's not a Carolinian problem; it's a human problem, and I have to say to you that, as citizens of the United States of America and as children of God who have been so richly blessed, who have such a marvelous tradition, the tradition of the West - we may not allow meanness, divisiveness, bigotry and hostility to mark us.

Where is the Church? Where are the pulpits of America? How can we allow it to go on, when I have to say to you we are blessed, we are affluent, we are full of resources, we have limitless power, and it's time for us to take the lead and giving it away with gentleness and graciousness, not yielding up our power to lead, but yielding up our egotism and our self-indulgence. We are called in a global society in freedom to commitment and only thus will the Spirit of God be able to nudge this whole process along, that creative, enlivening Spirit of God that would move us animals onward toward Spirit in order that there might be peace on earth