

Mission Within and Without
6th Sunday After Pentecost - July 4, 2010
Galatians 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-20

Here it is, Independence Day weekend. I hadn't read the entire Declaration of Independence since American History class in high school, so I pulled it up on the Internet. I was surprised how short it actually is! I was reminded how famous phrases, like "the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," sharpened the catalog of grievances against King George. And it was interesting to see how independence and liberty were carefully framed within the context of right government and the overarching guidance of divine Providence.

Re-reading the Declaration of Independence also reminded me that its soaring phrases didn't just sit there; they were crystallized and codified in our Constitution. The Declaration of Independence wasn't a "Get Lost King George" grenade tossed over the shoulder. Yes, it was the prelude to conflict; but afterward, it found its expression in our more prosaic but durable Constitution, which has allowed the nation to weather everything from a civil war to civil rights and maintain something of the identity and ideals expressed in the Declaration.

I got a bit of the same impression reading today's Epistle and Gospel. In Luke, Jesus sends out 70 followers with a terse message:

"The Kingdom of Heaven has come near you!" They were to go into villages, preach this word, heal the sick, and drive out demons. To me, this is a bit like the Declaration of Independence. It's brief, but it outlines the basics: The powers of sin, evil and death oppress and torment God's people. The mission of the 70 is to announce that God has had it with this malarkey; he's establishing his government over and against the illegitimate regime of Satan.

This is *not* license to anarchy: it's a call to repentance; and it's an announcement of who has *legitimate* authority, power, and government in the world. And that certainly isn't Satan! Nor is it the seventy; or even the people to whom the announcement is being made. It's *God*; and he is no distant potentate but *in their midst*, in the person of Jesus.

As in our country's history, so in our faith: soon after this "Declaration of Independence" from the deadly and oppressive powers of sin, Satan and death, there is war. Unlike every earthly conflict, which no matter how just and necessary, is inevitably fought amongst sinful human beings, *this* war was fought and won on our behalf by the sinless Lord Jesus, on a Cross. He not only saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven; he pursued him into hell and defeated him, rising from death and ascending to his Father's throne.

But until he comes again to establish his Kingdom in its full and final form, we live in the here-and-now. The Church has pondered what it means to be a fledgling outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven while still existing in this broken world, where our old enemies trouble us even in defeat and retreat. If "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News" is God's "Declaration of Independence;" and if Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit is the War of Independence, then a good deal of Jesus' teaching and the Epistles seem to shape a Constitution for his people!

St. Paul's letter to the Galatians is a case in point. Throughout the epistle, St. Paul reminds the Galatians that they have a Declaration of Independence, so to speak. They are not made right with God, and they are not freed from the powers of sin, evil, and death, by observance of the Law of God, holy and beneficial though that Law is. No; they - and we - have been freed from a "do-it-yourself" project of independence from those oppressive regimes through the War of Independence fought and won by Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of Jesus' victory, life goes on; and the life of the community of Jesus' followers must be rightly organized if the gifts of liberty, forgiveness and eternal life are to be preserved and enjoyed.

St. Paul "horizontalizes" the Law. It doesn't earn us a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Baptism in to Christ does; therefore Christians

need not obey the cultic law that made the Jews God's set-apart people. But this liberty isn't anarchy; nor does it mean there's no law at all. St. Paul writes, "You have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.... Bear one another's burdens, *and so fulfill the law of Christ.*"

St. Paul warns against the "works of the flesh" - evil, selfish and careless thoughts, words and deeds that make us think that freedom from being bound to the Law means freedom to set ourselves up as gods or dictators. No; just as independence from England didn't mean anarchy but the formation of a new government for the common good, so freedom from fulfilling God's law as a means of *redemption* is meant to lead us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to fulfill the law as a means of *helping our neighbor* to enjoy the benefits of redemption; and to live at peace with each other.

And just as the Constitution fleshes out in practical ways what it means to live as people "endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights" even in an imperfect world - for example through a series of checks and balances - so St. Paul fleshes out concrete ways we live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven even in this fallen world.

We still sin; even when it's not deliberate, we're so often "overtaken in trespass," as one translation aptly phrases it. Left

uncorrected, our sinfulness wreaks havoc. Whether with inadvertently hurtful remarks, or habitual struggles and failures against some besetting fault like gossip or abuse, we do real damage to ourselves and others. But citizens of the Kingdom of Christ are called to deal *gently* with each other - not excusing or turning a blind eye to sin, but *forgiving and correcting* it in a *spirit of gentleness*, constantly being aware of our own temptations, weaknesses and failures.

St. Paul uses two phrases that at first sound contradictory, but again a sort of civics lesson might help us understand. He calls upon Christians to *bear one another's burdens*, never growing weary in doing good, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; but almost in the same breath he exhorts everyone to examine their own work and *bear their own load*, knowing that they will sow what they reap.

Think of a company of soldiers, setting off to battle. On the one hand, they *must* be a "band of brothers," encouraging, challenging and aiding each other along the way. When one soldier lags behind, is injured, or is immobilized by fear, the others help, even risking their lives in order to preserve the team. Their survival, the battle, and possibly the fate of their country are in the balance. Still, every one of those soldiers is responsible for doing his or her job to the utmost. Whether one is a sharpshooter, tactician, parachute packer, or cook, they each have their job. They each "shoulder their own backpack."

So it is for us. The War of Independence has been won; but the enemy is still fighting a rear-guard battle of attrition, trying to take down as many of us as possible. We might not be out there on the front lines, fighting demons like the 70. But we're *each* called to master the unique weapons of the Spirit; today we're focusing on the spirit of gentleness. With it we *each* forgive each other's sins and correct, challenge and help each other resist the enemy's wiles. We might not work miraculous cures, like the apostles. But we're each called upon to be tireless in doing good: taking care of the sick; being patient with the slow; giving encouragement to the fearful. We might never be on the front line of *any* obvious battle - military or spiritual. But we're each called to remind people Whose Kingdom we're citizens of. We're each called to find recruits and to help "spiritual immigrants" to become *citizens* of our Savior's Kingdom. We're each called to live in community before that Savior, as people mindful and thankful for the blessings not only of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but more importantly, for the blessings of forgiveness, grace, redemption, and the knowledge that our names have been written in his Book of Life.

"The Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near!" That is *really* good news; it's the most important Declaration of Independence anyone will ever hear. The war has been won! And now, whether in mop-up actions on the front lines of the world, or in the temptations and pitfalls of

our everyday lives, we're each called to live with one other as true citizens of our Lord's Kingdom. He's given us many words as our Constitution. May he grant us his Spirit, who in turn grants us wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and faithfulness - and also gentleness, patience, humility and love. May our lives constantly show us to be citizens of our Savior's Kingdom; and may our words and deeds preserve, defend, and extend his blessings into the lives of those around us, until he comes again in glory; our battles cease; and he truly is our all in all. Amen.