

Pentecost 4, Proper 9
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

July 6, 2014
Rev. Paul Moore

Liberty for All

Two days ago we celebrated the 238th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. We hold it to be the birthday of our country. The fact is, it took 7 years for England to agree, With the signing of the Treaty of Paris on September 3, 1783. Is it wrong to claim the 4th as our nation's birthday? It depends entirely on where you're standing and what you're saying. From where we stand on our side of the Atlantic, this is the date after which we began making treaties with other nations as an independent and sovereign nation. In our minds we became Americans on this day. This is the birthday of the idea of the United States, that ideal picture of what we are all about in the world.

Our ideal of liberty is an ever-unfolding concept, constantly bedeviled by the gap between ideal and real. We keep searching for ways to live more fully aligned with this ideal. There are many who criticize the United States. Some of what they say is valid. They point a finger at the gap between the ideal and the real. But our ideal is an ideal, not necessarily a full reality. Let ideals be set alongside ideals and realities alongside realities. It is not accurate or fair to compare an ideal to a reality or vice versa.

But there is another question to ask. On what basis do we hold an ideal to be noble? As Christians we evaluate ideals in terms of the Gospel message. Does liberty stand up to the test? I believe that it does, and it goes like this.

The heart of God is the great mystery of unconditional and limitless love at the core of creation. Out of that love God creates us. We are created by love, for love and in love. When we love as God loves us we are most like God. The first Epistle of John writes in the 4th chapter, "Everyone that loves knows God and is born of God, for God is love." Love is relational. It makes no sense unless there is a lover and a beloved. The Trinity is the community of Love, and into that community we are called to share. But a relationship cannot be loving unless it is free. Love freely gives and freely receives. Anything more is coercion or manipulation. Anything less is self-centered economics. So God, out of that great unlimited and unconditioned love for us, in order that we might also enter into a truly loving relationship with God and one another, grants us radical freedom of will. We are not robots, doing what we will do with no real moral freedom or concern for consequences. We are always radically free in our innermost being to choose.

Liberty which is the political manifestation of free will, goes to the very heart of our

faith. The ideal of liberty draws its inspiration from human free will, the divine gift.

We see it in today's second lesson. Paul wrestles with the implications of free will in our broken, sinful state. He knows what is right, and he ends up doing what is wrong. If he holds one thing to be right he naturally wants to do that, but finds that he cannot. He ends up doing what he does not want to do. Then he makes an interesting statement. “It is obvious, then, that it is not me, but sin working in me.” In other words, “This action which I abhor originates from places within me that are not my true self. It arises from the tyranny of my ego in control, not the true self that lies hidden beneath.” “Who shall save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ our Lord!” The choices of the ego in control may feel free, but they are not. They are controlled by the absolute desire for self-preservation with no thought of another.

In Christ the tyranny of the ego is broken on the Cross, and in Christ we are given the freedom to live according to the Spirit, that deeper part of us that knows how to love. The false self does not live in freedom, only the true self, rooted in the Spirit of God. Freedom goes to the heart of what it means to be human, and therefore Christian.

What does that mean for us, who live in the land of liberty, on this Sunday close to the 4th of July, the birthday of our ideal? First it shows that we have something to give the world. Liberty finds its inspiration in the free will of the human soul, and the freedom of life in the Spirit, a divine gift that allows us to enter into loving, redeeming and transforming relationships. We, like no other nation in the modern world fly that flag in the global village. It is ours to fly, and we ought to fly it proudly, and to work humbly to close the gap between ideal and real in our own midst.

It also implies that other nations may have equally important flags to fly. Some have other ideals. The Japanese, for instance, might fly the flag of the supremacy of the collective good, they fly the flag of another ideal that goes more to the heart of who they are as a people. Like us, there is always a gap between the ideal and the real. How big that gap may be is not the topic of this sermon. It's an internal affair that does not allow for our comment without invitation, and then only in the most tentative of ways. (That would be tantamount to me coming into your home and telling you how badly you garden.) It is only fair to compare ideals to ideals.

The gift of every people to the global community is precisely their ideals. We offer liberty. Germany might offer order. Mexico might fly the flag of history and legacy. Ecuador, where I was born, would be proud to stand up for honor. Each one stands and waves its flag for what is most dear to their collective soul. Perhaps it is in this mix that we can get a glimpse of God in the face of humanity.

There are some ideals I cannot honor. If a people stands up for raw power as their proud standard, where might makes right, and that's all right, then I would say that there is not a religious tradition in the world that at its best would stand to honor that flag. I certainly would not.

And so when we pray that God bless our nation, we pray for the strength to fly our flag well, and the humility and diligence to work on closing the gap. It is vital to do pray such prayers with the greatest of humility. We must know what we are NOT saying. We are NOT praying that God NOT bless another nation in terms of their own ideals. "God bless America" does not mean that God does not equally bless Mexico or Canada or England or Germany, or China, or, in ways we do not yet fully see, places like Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria and Egypt. And we are NOT presuming to say that because we hold to the ideal of liberty that we garner greater favor with God than a people whose ideal is something else. And we are NOT comparing our ideal with another nation's reality. Just because another nation's people are not as free as we believe they should be does NOT make them less than us in the eyes of God. All such thinking is arrogant, self-centered, short-sighted and sinful, for it presumes to set ourselves up as judges of God's world.

But we can in full confidence pray that God bless us, for we have a sacred duty to perform in the village of this planet, to fly the flag of liberty, to proclaim it's affinity to the sacred gift of human free will, and to work to defend liberty in the world's marketplace.

After this service, for those who wish to remain in the Nave, We will play our National Anthem. If you choose to stay I suggest that it become for you a humble prayer, praying for the strength to stand up for such a noble and godly virtue as liberty and the freedom that inspires it, praying for the strength to struggle with the gap, and praying for humility before those who fly another noble flag.