

Declaring Our Independence

Independence Day - Proper 9C - July 4, 2010

A cop pulls over a car full of nuns. The cop says, "Sister, the speed limit on this highway is 55 mph. Why are you going so slow?" Sister replies, "I saw a lot of signs that said 41, not 55." The cop says, "Sister, that's the name of the highway, not the speed limit." "Silly me," the embarrassed nun says. "Thanks for letting me know. I'll be more careful." But then the cop glances in the back seat where the other nuns are quaking with fear. He asks, "Excuse me, Sister, what's wrong with your friends?" Sister says, "Oh, we just got off Highway 101."

Happy Independence Day! On this special day in the life and memory of our nation, it seems appropriate we talk about freedom; freedom to choose, freedom to think, freedom to act. A young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He was watching for kids darting out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something. As his car passed, no children appeared. Instead, a brick smashed into the Jag's side door. He slammed on the brakes and backed the Jag back to the spot where the brick had been thrown. The angry driver then jumped out of the car, grabbed the nearest kid and pushed him up against a parked car shouting, "What was that all about and who are you? Just what the heck are you doing? That's a new car and that brick you threw is going to cost a lot of money. Why did you do it?" The young boy was apologetic. "Please, mister, please, I'm sorry but I didn't know what else to do," he pleaded. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop." With tears dripping down his face and off his chin, the youth pointed to a spot just around a parked car. "It's my brother," he said, "he rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up." Now sobbing, the boy asked the stunned executive, "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me." Moved beyond words, the driver tried to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. He hurriedly lifted the handicapped boy back into the wheelchair, then took out a linen handkerchief and dabbed at the fresh scrapes and cuts. A quick look told him everything was going to be okay. "Thank you and may God bless you," the grateful child told the stranger. Too shook up for words, the man simply watched the boy push his wheelchair-bound brother down the sidewalk toward their home. It was a long, slow walk back to the Jaguar. The damage was very noticeable, but the driver never bothered to repair the dented side door. He kept the dent there to remind him of this message: "Don't go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention!"

It would have been good for the King of England to have heard that story sometime around 1770. One day the King was riding merrily down the road in his royal carriage when a brick smashed into the side door. That brick was the Declaration of Independence lobbed over the Atlantic from the 13 colonies. It was a kind of "Dear John" letter which basically said, "Our relationship hasn't been good for a long time.

You don't listen, you do not respect our wishes and needs, and you think you can bully us around endlessly and we will just take it. Your lack of hospitality and respectfulness have mortally wounded our relationship. This is your notice; we are breaking up. We hereby declare our independence." Political independence, the freedom for a people to decide for themselves, freedom from tyranny and from despotic authoritarianism is essential in the pursuit of, to use the words of our Constitution, a more perfect union, justice, domestic tranquility and the blessings of liberty.

And as important and basic as political freedom is, there is another kind of freedom just as important and essential, spiritual freedom, freedom from spiritual tyranny and despotism. Political freedom and spiritual freedom share at least two characteristics in common. First, they each begin the day we open our eyes and recognize our bondage and enslavement. We at last see our situation is unbearable and cannot continue. This new awareness often happens when a brick, in one form or another, lands on us. Wisdom and consciousness are usually born of some type of struggle, crisis and pain and so it is not unusual for someone to come into an awareness of their spiritual chains through the experience of personal pain. It is through our pain we finally realize we have been hiding from the world with alcohol or prescription tranquilizers. It is because of our suffering we come to see for the first time our selfishness and egocentricity, our need to always have our own way at the expense of all around us. It is as a result of our anguish we begin to look honestly at the enormous amount of fear and the extent of the variety of fears we carry in our minds each and every day; fears which reduce our lives to the size of a postage stamp and make us hostile toward anything or anyone new or different.

The second similarity between political and spiritual freedom is the necessity to take a stand. Having recognized our pain to be unbearable and our despair to be poisonous, we make a clear and conscious choice to take a stand, to choose a different path, to decide to do whatever is necessary to gain deliverance and freedom from this pain and despair. The founders of our nation came to this crossroads. A voiceless existence under an uncaring and unjust authoritarian king would no longer be tolerated. And in parallel fashion, the Gospel invites us to stand up and choose to end our enslavement to alcohol and/or other chemicals, to end our bondage to selfishness and greed, and to end our imprisonment in the dungeons of fear and insecurity.

Finally, there is one important difference between political & spiritual freedom. Political freedom is normally achieved when a people fall in love with a shared vision of an independent state operating by democratic principles. Spiritual freedom is achieved when we fall in love with a person, the God revealed to us in the love and compassion of Jesus. Spiritual freedom is paradoxical in that it comes to us only when we give ourselves, when we surrender our hearts, when we commit the totality of our lives to the God who lives in and through and all around us. 2 Cor. 3:17: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." AMEN.