

Born Free and Equal

In the name of him who set us free, dear friends in Christ: The large white tents that are popping up like mushrooms in grocery store parking lots and from which they will be hawking fireworks tell us that our nation's Independence Day is coming up. It's a day well worth celebrating with hearts grateful to God for the freedoms and rights he has granted to us as citizens of this blessed land. Historically speaking, our independence means a lot to us, and it's more than simply freedom from foreign oppression and unjust taxes. What American liberty from European control meant was that we could move forward with an entirely different concept of human government. It made possible the great American experiment with democracy, where there would be no nobles who ruled by right of birth, no hereditary landed aristocracy that held the majority of men, the "commoners", in perpetual servitude. Instead, at its foundation, it would be taken as self-evident that all men are created equal, and that each person is endowed by the Creator with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It was a radically new concept – or rather, the concept wasn't new; but those who held the power had never given it a chance to work. American Independence made it possible. That's what the observance is really all about: the opportunity to put into practice the idea that all people are born free and equal, as well as the good things that have resulted from putting that idea into practice. And so as a nation we'll celebrate, as has become the custom for most, with a long weekend, with backyard barbecues, and, of course, with countless community fireworks displays across the country. And in deference to the spirit of 1776 (and to gratify the pyromania most of us share to some degree) many celebrants will keep the rebellion alive as youngsters (and oldsters) display their own private fireworks, the best of which are always illegal to own or set off. But hey, it just wouldn't be the 4th of July without all those brilliant flashes and loud bangs.

Fireworks are *the* Fourth of July tradition. They have been ever since we began celebrating Independence Day; but I wonder how many of us think of them as anything more than something pretty and fun to watch. Imagine what it must have been like, say, 200 plus years ago when they celebrated the Fourth. Back then those flashes and bangs would have reminded the watchers of the fury of the bitter war they fought to win their liberty; when the rockets red glare and bombs bursting in air were fired in anger. The blasts of those "fireworks" rained shards of hot metal on patriots and oppressors that killed men and maimed bodies. And in every little church like ours, there would be a brass plaque somewhere that named the husbands and sons who would never come home from that war. And seated in the pews there would be men missing limbs, blinded, deafened, or otherwise permanently wounded, bearing silent testimony to the fierce conflict and all those years of suffering and deprivation. Such people would have watched Fourth of July fireworks with ... what? Greater *respect*, perhaps. It certainly would have been more to them than a loud and expensive light show. Their celebrations would have been more solemn and heartfelt because they knew firsthand the oppression of living under foreign domination, the relief of the freedom they'd won, and the terrible price they had to pay to attain it.

It's safe to say that we in our time have lost most of that sense of reverence and joy in celebrating the 4th of July. We were *born* free and equal. We've never known it any other way, and so we pretty much take it for granted. Today it's primarily immigrants to this country who are able to fully appreciate the value of the freedom and equality we've always known. I can remember about thirty-five years ago, during the Cold War, a Soviet fighter pilot took an enormous risk and defected with his plane, which just happened to be the latest high-tech

model that our folks were itching to get their hands on for analysis. They brought this pilot to the Washington DC area for “debriefing”, and during some off time they took him to a few nearby shops and malls to get him some clothes and other necessities. As he looked around, he couldn’t believe the way that typical Americans lived. It was nothing like what he’d been taught to expect back in the “Soviet workers’ paradise”. He figured that they had taken him to some kind of artificial prosperity zone they had created to deceive people such as himself, a sort of Disney World, as it were, set up to fool defectors and spies into thinking that the whole country was as free and prosperous as what he was seeing. When he expressed his suspicions, the people in charge said, “Okay, fine. Take him wherever he wants to go.” So they drove around for nearly a hundred miles, him telling them where and when to turn, until at last he realized that’s just the way we live here – that the whole country was, at least from his perspective and what he was used to, like a magic kingdom. At that point he began to understand what it meant to be free.

Or again, perhaps some of you have sat through a presentation by Simon Yiech who was a refugee from Sudan. He’s now a Lutheran pastor serving a whole congregation of Sudanese refugees in the Des Moines area. The stories he tells of what is happening in his country are horrific: forced conversions to Islam – those who refuse having hands or legs cut off, suffering attacks in the middle of the night by raiders armed with machetes and rifles, the government approving the confiscation of their property, livestock, and goods, and then living in squalor in wretched refugee camps. It’s people like these who have their rebirth of freedom and equality in this country later in life who really understand what celebrating the 4th of July is all about.

And the same is often true in a spiritual sense. I’ve noticed that many of the strongest advocates of Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular are those who come to it later in life, and specifically from some other form of spirituality that stressed the law and all the things a person had to do to obey God and live righteously. Right now some of the best and most articulate authors our Synod has writing books about Lutheran theology are converts. They’re passionate about what they do precisely because they are able to say, “I’ve been out there and know the slavery of being told week after week about all the things I have to do to be a good Christian, and about all the happy attitudes and emotions I was supposed to feel while doing them – but didn’t. Now I truly know what it means to be free in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” These authors write to invite people similarly bound in legalistic religious systems to the freedom they have found, as well as to tell us who were born into this faith what a precious treasure we possess and all too often take for granted.

So doing, they are following in the footsteps of some other prolific Christian writers who wrote fervently to preserve and promote the Gospel. I’m thinking of St. Paul who wrote most of the New Testament, and Martin Luther who ... well, he wrote a lot of stuff. These two men had a lot in common. Both were highly trained in the Scriptures – doctors of theology. Both had been brought up and trained in a highly legalistic way of understanding the Scriptures. It was all about the do’s and don’ts of pleasing God and earning the right to eternal life. And both of these men strived mightily to achieve the blessed life their legalistic way of understanding the Scriptures imposed upon them. The big difference was that Luther was absolutely wretched because he found that no matter how hard he tried, he was failing to live up to the perfection God demanded. The law was too heavy a burden for him. Whereas Paul was so blinded by the lie of legalism that he imagined he was doing just fine. He was like a brainwashed prisoner who learned to love his prison cell because it gave him a sense of security. He was under the oppression of the Law and loving it. You may recall that the Lord had to physically knock him into the dirt and blind him so that he could begin to see the truth. But once he did, once he

knew the freedom of the Gospel, he became the Church's most ardent advocate. He was determined to take the freedom of Christ to a world in slavery. And having tasted that freedom himself, he was even more determined never again to go back under the Law.

That's why he wrote his letter to the churches of Galatia, part of which is this morning's Epistle. In it he explained that the law has a purpose: it was "our guardian", he says, "to lead us to Christ". The word he uses there for being a guardian describes a stern schoolmaster. Imagine a guy standing there watching over to a child being forced to memorize a long, less-than-interesting lesson, and every time the hand or eye wonders a bit—whack! with the pointer. (Maybe some of you have personal recollections of such things.) The law held us in such a prison, Paul writes, that we might learn its lesson, namely, that it can't be fulfilled by sinners such as ourselves. No matter how hard we try and how many times the schoolmaster hits us, we're still not going to be perfect and therefore we cannot save ourselves from hell. Once you've learned that lesson, the Law has done its work. When you see that *you* cannot fulfill the law, the Scriptures point you to the One who fulfilled the Law *for you*: Jesus Christ. His perfect obedience, his sacrificial death to pay the penalty of your sin, and his resurrection to life are all yours *not by doing*, but *by believing and trusting* in what he did. When you get to that point, you've graduated. You don't have to sit in the classroom and let that guy keep hitting you. That's what some of the Galatians wanted to do. Having come to faith Christ, they put their faith in him on the backburner and kept struggling for their own personal perfection under the Law. Paul wrote to warn them against such foolishness. Having come to the freedom of the Gospel, don't allow yourselves to be placed back under the Law's bondage again.

Of course, the reason there was a Reformation was precisely because the medieval church failed to heed Paul's warning. It had become a spiritual prison again. And while there were many who, like Paul before his conversion, were deceived into thinking that their prison was just dandy, there were others like Luther who were driven to despair by the schoolmaster's constant beatings. Not surprisingly, it was by reading what St. Paul wrote that Luther rediscovered the truth that had been suppressed for so long. Once he did, once he was set free by faith in Christ, he became another champion of the cause, savoring the freedom he'd come to know all the more precisely because he had known the cruel oppression that came before it.

And all of this should throw up some red flags for us. Those who do not value their freedom are those who are most in danger of losing it. We who were born into this nation as free and equal citizens don't really appreciate what we've got. The oppression of foreign domination is something we've never known; the fierce struggle for freedom too distant a memory. And if our national independence won nearly 240 years ago seems remote, how much more remote is the hard fought victory for our salvation that took place on a cross outside Jerusalem 2000 years ago, or the fight to reclaim the freedom that victory achieved 500 years ago? How can we who were born into our Christian freedom and have always taken it for granted learn to cherish it as much as those who come to it later in life?

The answer lies first in recognizing the fact that we weren't born free. Not one of us was. Oh, we were born *equal* all right: equally under the Law's condemnation. The Scriptures tell us plainly that we were all conceived and born in sin and under the wrath of God. And like Paul before his conversion, we didn't even know it. How could we? For most of us, we were mere infants. But just as the Lord supernaturally intervened to call Paul to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit and give him a new birth of freedom, Christ came to set us free in the washing of rebirth in Holy Baptism. Through the water and the Word he introduced us to the risen Savior and made us trust in him. More than that, what Paul writes in this morning's epistle is that in Baptism we were clothed in Christ; that is, placed inside him by God's power. What that means

is that when God looks at you, he doesn't see your sins. Instead he sees his Son Jesus Christ and his sinless perfection.

There's actually more to it. Paul elsewhere writes that putting on Christ in Baptism means that what happened to him also happened to you. That is to say that his suffering becomes your suffering, his death becomes your death, his burial is yours, and so is his resurrection. What that means is that your Baptism brings the battle won for your freedom into the present – into your life. Say it another way: it makes you a veteran of the war for independence. For you, it wasn't just a battle fought 2000 years ago – it happened to you in Christ. Your Baptism places you in Christ on the cross when he atoned for the sins of the world. It's precisely that truth that sets you free from the bondage of the Law, and allows you to be reborn in Christ: a free and equal citizen of the kingdom of God.

That's also why Luther taught Christians to make the sign of the cross on themselves at the mention of the Trinitarian invocation: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That's the name into which you were baptized according to Christ's instruction and so became God's child and heir. What Luther suggested was that at the mention of God's name, we should remember our Baptisms in a tangible way in order to bring the battle on the cross that earned our freedom to the present once again – and to apply the truth of that battle won, the forgiveness and freedom it achieved *to the present* – not like a firework that is only a representation and echo of a war fought long ago, but rather the cross of Christ applied to me, to you, in the here and now. It's a way to keep in mind the precious freedom that God has given to us in his Son as well as its frightful cost. And please don't misunderstand me. Whether or not you make the sign of the cross on yourself is not important. What is important is remembering your Baptism and the grace and faith God gives you every day that keeps you his child and heir in time and in eternity.

My friends, just as national freedom is a treasure that constantly needs to be defended from enemies foreign and domestic that seek to take it away, so also the apathy and negligence of our sinful nature within, and the cunning schemes of the devil and world from without seek to rob us of the freedom we have in Christ. So may we, by God's grace, and by constantly bringing the victory he won for us into the present by his Word, by his body and blood given for us, and by the remembrance of our baptismal rebirths, remain always free and equal in Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!