

The Declaration of Dependence

In the name of him who frees the whole world from the curse of sin, dear friends in Christ: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men ... are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness ...”, so wrote founding Father Thomas Jefferson in the preamble to our nation’s Declaration of Independence. He went on to say that in order to secure and protect those rights, people create governments whose responsibility it is to do just that. And when, he said, the established governments become destructive toward these ends, it is the right – even the duty – of the people to change or abolish them, and to set up for themselves new governments that they believe will better achieve their safety and happiness. Most of what follows in the Declaration is a list a grievances against the Crown of Great Britain, showing how it had failed to protect these rights among the colonists in America; and how, therefore, they were justified in rejecting the authority of the Crown and creating their own system of rule. With the signing and publication of the Declaration, we took things into our own hands and a new nation was born.

And now, 240 years later, we might ask how the great experiment in American independence is doing. Are we in this country and with our present government doing a better job of securing the rights to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness than was done in the past? In order to find out, let’s look at them one at a time:

Starting with the Right to Life ... and, uh oh, we’ve already opened a can of worms here, haven’t we? The Right to Life is now considered by many of our countrymen to be a repressive movement whose goal it is to take away rights that our founding fathers never imagined but that are tenaciously clung to like what’s touted as the “right to die with dignity” (aka “doctor assisted suicide”) or what’s being euphemistically called the “right to choose”, specifically to choose to murder American babies who have the disadvantage of being still in the womb – or, in the case of partial birth abortion, murdering babies who are 90% out of the womb. You know, I don’t recall reading in any American history that the British were killing people in this country at the rate of nearly 3500 a day, as is being done now. As a matter of fact, I don’t recall reading that the British were depriving anyone of the right to life. It took independence to give us the freedom to choose to do that to each other.

Hmmm ... maybe we should move on to the next one: the Right to Liberty. Surely we’ve done a better job of providing freedom for our citizens than was done in the past; though, to be fair, the colonists did enjoy widespread freedoms under British rule. They could live where they wanted, worship God as they pleased, and pursue education, self improvement, whatever careers they wanted ... it wasn’t exactly a North Korean-like tyrant under whom they were suffering oppression. It’s true that they could be forced against their will to provide housing for British soldiers ... British soldiers who were there in the American wilderness, thousands of miles from their homes and loved ones, precisely in order to protect colonists from attacks by the French and their Indian allies. That seems a small price to pay to stay alive. I mean, if you exercise the freedom to live where it’s dangerous, you might expect some inconveniences – like having to support the guys who are defending your right to life. Of course, the biggest issues of Liberty had to do with paying taxes. The colonists felt that they were not properly represented in Parliament. They complained that taxes could be imposed upon them arbitrarily and without their consent which was the right of other British citizens. It was indeed a terrible injustice. Thankfully, now that we’re free, we are properly represented; and to boot, we enjoy the services

of our own “kinder, gentler” IRS; so no one complains about paying taxes any more, even though a much higher percentage of our income goes toward paying them than was ever the case under British rule. Ah, but at least we’re *free* to choose to tax ourselves more. ... But I’m not sure I like the way this is going.

Well, what about the right to pursue happiness? Here, at least, we must agree that the government we’ve formed protects to the greatest extent possible the right of the people to pursue their individual dreams and goals that they believe will lead to personal happiness and fulfillment. As long as it’s not illegal, you can do pretty much whatever you want if you think it will make you happy. But it’s worth asking after 240 years of experience with this right so duly protected, *are we happy?* If we look at many of the indicators that are normally associated with happiness, you would think that we should be. We are among the best educated, healthiest, and wealthiest people who have ever lived on the face of the earth. We have more time for leisure and recreation, and far more options for entertainment than ever before. Our colonial ancestors, who in their day lived better than a third of the world’s population lives even today, could not have imagined the kind of luxury we take for granted—and now seem to think is the minimum baseline for survival.

Yet, with all we have going for us, Americans report (and show through their actions) that we are among the least happy people in history. Numerous surveys and studies agree that less than a third of Americans describe themselves as “happy”. Even then, the condition of being happy is perceived by most as being something fragile and temporary. For the majority, happiness is the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We believe we might eventually reach it if we knuckle down and stick with our struggle through the daily rat-race and dog-eat-dog climb to the top, forsaking pleasures and time spent with family and friends on the way. That, or we could win the lottery. Either way, if one reaches the elusive goal, all too often they arrive only to discover that the pot of happiness is empty. Some others buy into the lie that happiness is found within, in greater individuality or independence: the idea that you can create your own happiness through mental adjustment or self-realization. What those who pursue that path find instead is lonely isolation in a self-deluded fantasy. Others try to fill the need we have to find happiness in meaningful relationships with other people without ever moving away from the screens of their electronic devices and coming into contact with real human beings. They create for themselves artificial personalities that are free of the defects and foibles they wish to hide from others and they spend their time in cyberspace chat rooms interacting with other equally artificial people. And far from even bothering to try to find real happiness, many others are merely seeking to escape depression through work, alcohol, drugs, unhealthy and immoral relationships, and vices too numerous to name.

So, Life, Liberty, and Happiness ... all in all, it seems the great experiment to form a better and more perfect union has fallen short of its hoped-for goal. But don’t misunderstand me: I’m not trying to bash our country, our government, or our people. I’m as patriotic as anyone. I love this land and wore its uniform with pride. What I’m suggesting instead is that perhaps Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness are not so much inalienable rights ordained by God as they are precious gifts to be received directly from his hand; and despite the best and noblest intentions of our founding fathers, they lie outside the ability of any government to secure for its citizens.

But that should not bring us to despair. It happens that this morning’s Epistle reading is the preamble of a different founding father’s declaration. The Apostle John, one of the men Jesus hand-picked to help build his Church, writes this declaration not for a single nation, but for everyone in the world who is yearning for true Life, true Liberty, and true Happiness—not merely

the right to try to find them. And rather than making his declaration a justification for independence from a certain government of men, his is a declaration of total dependence on the One, True, Holy, and Living God.

John writes, “The Life was made manifest”. You see, Life not a right you have. Nor is it even what we normally think of as life. It’s not your mental consciousness, the electric impulses in your brain, the warm blood coursing through your veins, or the bellows-like action of your lungs. That’s life of a sort; but it’s not *real* life. If that’s the only kind of life you have, then the Scriptures declare that you are dead even while you live. No, the Life John speaks of comes to you from the outside. Life is a revelation from God. It’s the revelation *of God*: his disclosure of himself to you. To be alive, really alive, you have to be spiritually connected to the source of life. You have to know him; not just know about him or suppose in your mind that he probably exists. Specifically, you have to know him as he reveals himself. And he doesn’t reveal himself as something incomprehensibly vague, distant, or impersonal. Instead he reveals himself up close and very personal. John says he saw with his eyes, touched with his hands, and heard with his ears God as he revealed himself in the person of Christ Jesus. It’s through the risen Lord Jesus, God’s Son, who suffered and died for our sins – who through dying the death we deserve defeated death for us – and who rose and appeared alive to his disciples that God shows us the True Life and reaches out and connects us to it. It’s like Jesus tells Thomas in today’s Gospel. “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side.” What John is saying is that this connection ... this *interaction* with the Divine in Christ Jesus *is* Life: *Eternal Life*. Which echoes what Jesus himself declared when he prayed to his Father, “*This is Life Eternal: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*” God wants you to know him, which is why he continues to come to you in ways that can be heard, seen, and touched, that is through his Word, through the cleansing water of Baptism, and through the body and blood of Jesus given under the sacramental elements in Holy Communion. He does this so that you can have Life by being in continuing fellowship with him forever.

And a big part of this Life is enjoying Liberty, *real* Liberty. Again, it’s not what we normally think of as liberty. It’s not freedom from unwanted obligations that are unpleasant, costly, or painful—like being forced to quarter soldiers or pay taxes without any say about it. Nor is it the freedom to do whatever you want to indulge your sinful nature. Instead, John is talking about freedom from sin and all of its unpleasant, costly, and painful consequences. And someone may think, “*Freedom from sin? Some freedom! I’m free to do whatever I want right now, to sin or not to: that’s freedom!*” But is it? The fact is there’s no freedom in sin at all, because the truth is that once in sin, you cannot choose not to sin. Go ahead and try. John says if you think you can, you’re only fooling yourself and calling God a liar. The harder you try not to sin, the more aware you become of its enslaving power over you.

It’s in opposition to this enslavement that John speaks of real Liberty: the Liberty to overcome sin and to be set free from its consequences. That doesn’t come from your best efforts to fight sin and temptation or by trying your best to live a holy life. It comes from what he calls walking in the Light. He means continuously exposing yourself and your actions to the Light of God’s revelation that allows you to see the sin in your life so that you can repent of it and confess it. When you do, John says, “*He is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and [the blood of Jesus his Son will] cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” So, when we walk in the Light of Christ, we really are free of sin—not by our doing; but by trusting in what he did for us.

And finally, John says, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” What he’s saying is that by communicating this message to you, he hopes to bring you Life; that

is, into fellowship with God through the forgiveness of sin provided to you by Jesus' death and resurrection. And by so doing, he will necessarily bring you into fellowship with him and everyone else who has Life and Liberty in Christ. *That* will complete his joy, because, like our God and Father, those who are in fellowship with him have an aching heart for those who remain on the outside, who as yet have not found Life and Liberty in Christ. And everyone in this fellowship joins in the joy of heaven over each and every sinner who repents. *That* is how John is pursuing and *achieving* real Happiness. He understands that real happiness doesn't come from material possessions or achievements; but from meaningful, honest, loving, and lasting relationships with other people; that is, by *Fellowshipping* with them. God created us to find happiness that way. And he wants you to find that happiness too.

So, Life, Liberty, and Happiness ... these truths are not self-evident, nor are they inalienable rights. They are instead precious gifts that are revealed by God our Father who wants to give them to us the only way he can: through his Son Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. They come to us through total *dependence* on him. May he give us the grace each day to receive them, and to walk in the Light as he is in the Light. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!