

John 3:16-17

Romans 6:12-23

July 2, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

INDEPENDENT LIVING

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

Two hundred forty-one years ago, on Tuesday, July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was adopted by Congress, after being presented on June 28. Most signers signed the declaration on August 2.

Perhaps you had to memorize the introduction to the Declaration of Independence when you were in high school or for debate club or a public speaking class. If you’ve ever read the declaration in full, you know the bulk of the document lists the grievances of the colonies against King George that, in the eyes of the colonists, justified a rebellion and a declaration of independence.

The final paragraph of the declaration may not be as well known as the introduction. It restates the claim to independence and lays out a bare outline of the responsibilities of the new nation:

“We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that the united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

Almost exactly twelve years later, on June 21, 1788, the Constitution of the United States of America became effective when New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the document. The preamble to the Constitution says: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

In answer to the question, “What is the relationship between the Declaration of the Independence and the Constitution?” one writer says, “After Independence, the Declaration remained as a statement of America’s natural law ideals. The Constitution was adopted to move American positive law closer to those ideals. The Constitution did this in at least two principal ways: by substantive rules, and by imposing procedures designed to produce better results.”¹ Another person observes, “The broad language of the Constitution is illuminated by the principles set forth in the Declaration.” In other words, the Constitution spells out how to do what the Declaration declares us to be, free and independent states. It’s not enough — nor is it sustainable — simply to declare “We’re free!” with no direction for the future and the common good.

We see the same pattern in the life of God’s people, beginning with the children of Israel. Their/our founding principle is called the Great Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Why should they do that, and how should they do that? A few verses later in Deuteronomy 6 we read, “When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive.’” (Deuteronomy 6:20-21, 23-24)

Imagine God saying to his people, “You’re free now!” and the people asking, “What does that mean? What are we supposed to do?” So God says, “You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an idol, you shall not take the Lord’s name in vain, etc., etc.” In other words, God’s people are free from Pharaoh’s slavery, but they’re not free to do anything and everything they want to do. Instead, they are free **from** slavery and free to live **for** God by living according to God’s ways, for their lasting good, so as to keep them alive.

Last week’s epistle lesson from Romans 6 ended with this encouragement, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:12) Paul can say that/encourage that kind of living because, he says, we have been set free from slavery to sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, just as with the Great Shema and our nation’s Declaration of Independence, as people set free in Christ, we are not set free to do anything and everything we want to do. If that were true, then the answer to Paul’s questions, “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” and “Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” would be, “Of course! Go right ahead — do whatever you want. You’re free, aren’t you?”

But Paul’s answer to both of those questions is an emphatic, “No! By no means! No indeed!” His reason for that answer is grounded in what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not in anything we have done for God. That’s why Paul talks so much about grace and our response to God’s grace in how we

live as followers of Jesus Christ. “But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.” (Romans 6:22)

If you keep reading in Romans, you’ll eventually come to Paul’s advice about how to live the new life in Christ. That’s Paul’s typical pattern in his letters. He lays out the fundamental principles of grace and mercy and freedom in Christ (sort of like the Declaration of Independence), then follows up with how to live in the freedom, for God and for others (sort of like the Constitution of the United States). Listen to some of the headings in my study Bible from the latter sections of Paul’s letters: The New Life in Christ; Marks of the True Christian; Being Subject to Authorities; Love for One Another; Do Not Judge Another; Do Not Make Another Stumble; Please Others, Not Yourself; Do All to the Glory of God; One Body with Many Members; The Gift of Love; The Ministry of Reconciliation; Freedom for Love; Bear One Another’s Burdens; One in Christ; Unity in the Body of Christ. Does that sound like “Yay! We’re free to do anything and everything we want to do!”? By no means! Just the opposite — it sounds like, “Yay! We’re free to love God and to love our neighbors in a way that we’ve never been able to do before!”

A number of years ago, Nell Sloan shared a great devotion during opening assembly before Sunday School. I don’t remember everything she said that morning, but I do remember her encouraging us to “turn our got-to’s into get-to’s.” That’s a great summary of what it means to be free in Christ. When we start thinking that our Christian life is nothing more than a bunch of “got-to’s,” living for God will be a burden to bear. But freedom in Christ means our life is now full of “get-to’s” for God, and that means life.

“Independent living” communities are increasingly attractive for retirees. One independent living community in Wilmington advertises, “We understand that a new window of opportunity stands before you. . . It is time to take advantage of the freedom that you can experience, without the daily responsibilities that keep you from experiencing everything that retirement has to offer.” The advertisement describes “the freedom to focus on those things that are truly important.” Another article about independent living communities in general says, “Once you see the necessity and start to think about the possibilities of a new life, a change, you’ll feel like a weight has been lifted. And you’ll feel freer than ever. You like your independence but don’t want to bother with some tasks. . .” Then there’s the article at www.seniorhomes.com called “Independent Living; Life Without Responsibilities.”²

I know what that last article means — no yardwork, no laundry chores, etc. But “Life Without Responsibilities” is not a good or accurate description of our independent living as citizens of the United States of America or as followers of Jesus Christ. Our declaration of independence in Christ brings “a new window of opportunity . . . the freedom to focus on the things that are truly important . . . a new life, a change, like a weight has been lifted. . . to feel freer than ever.”

It sounds contradictory to talk about being set free from slavery and tyranny, only to become subservient to someone else. But our freedom depends on it. In these Unit-

ed States, it means being free from the tyranny of human leaders, but submitting ourselves to the idea of the common good and living in a way that the common good is made possible for everyone. In our Christian lives, it means being free from the tyranny of sin, but submitting ourselves to God and living in a way that shows God's love and freedom in everything we do. Near the end of his letter to the Galatians, which has been called the Christian Magna Carta, Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:1, 13-14)

That is independent living at its finest — living in every way for God who has given us the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have called us to be the church of Jesus Christ. Keep us one in faith and service, breaking bread together, and proclaiming the good news to the world, that all may believe you are love, turn to your ways, and live in the light of your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Rob Natelson, "The Relationship Between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution," March 21, 2017 at www.i2i.org.

²The first quote is from www.cambridgevillageofwilmington.com. The second quote is from Ken Teegardin, "Selecting an Independent Living Community," at www.seniorliving.org. The third quote is from "Independent Living: Life Without Responsibilities" at www.seniorhomes.org.