

John 6:1-15, 25-35

Romans 8:1-17

July 3, 2022

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

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

THE SPIRIT OF FREEDOM

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.

On July 2, 1776, the members of the Continental Congress concluded their debate on a resolution that had been proposed on June 7 by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia and seconded by John Adams of Massachusetts. The following resolution was approved: "That these 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."

Two hundred forty-six years ago today, John Adams wrote one of his many letters to his wife, Abigail, at their home in Massachusetts. Excited by the vote of Congress on the previous day, Adams wrote to Abigail: "The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illumination from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."

But, in the workings of the Continental Congress, John Adams had been appointed as a member of a Committee of Five to write a Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson gave his draft document to Adams and Benjamin Franklin so they could review it. Jefferson edited the draft and submitted it to Congress, which then debated and approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4. So, we didn't celebrate yesterday with Pomp and Parades, Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other. We'll do that tomorrow.¹

In his outstanding commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, my academic advisor and mentor, Paul Achtemeier, begins his discussion of Romans 8:1-11 this way:

"One of the joys of summer is the celebration of the Fourth of July. Parades, picnics, fireworks, and family gatherings all make the observance of our independence as a nation a time of delight. If those who celebrate at times forget that the occasion for such celebration is our national freedom, it is nevertheless that very freedom that allows them to enjoy themselves on the Fourth as they deem suitable. Appropriately enough, therefore, the celebration of the anniversary of the declaration of national independence of the United States is a time of great joy.

“When Paul, in these verses, describes the Christian’s freedom from the bondage to sin and its servant, the law, he is similarly in a celebrative mood. In contrast to the despair of bondage which had characterized chapter 7, Paul now writes in the joy of freedom, the freedom of a creation whose rebellion and enmity to its God he has now overcome.”²

As we enjoy this three-day weekend and finish our preparations for tomorrow’s Fourth of July picnics and cookouts, today we gather at the Lord’s Table for a special meal to celebrate the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. As we have heard the last two weeks, in Christ we are free **from** sin and death and free **to** love God and our neighbor. Last Sunday, we heard Paul’s words to the Galatian Christians, sort of our Declaration of Independence as Christians: “For freedom Christ has set us free. . . For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters . . .” (Galatians 5:1, 13) But, remember, Paul goes on to say, “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . 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)

As we eat the bread at the Lord’s table this morning, we remember and celebrate how Christ has set us free, as Paul says, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:2) We also remember another time when God’s people ate bread after being delivered from bondage. God gave the Israelites their freedom from Pharaoh and called them to a life of freedom in and service to him as their God. And yet, after only six weeks of freedom, the whole congregation of Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.” (Exodus 16:2-4)

As we eat the bread this morning, we remember another time when people gathered together in a deserted place and ate bread until they were satisfied. However, the next morning their stomachs were rumbling again, so they went looking for Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your will of loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life. . . . I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. . . I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:26-27, 32-35)

These two stories are good illustrations of what Paul means by “living according to the flesh” and “living according to the Spirit.” Another word for “living according to the flesh” is “self-interest” — sort of like complaining against the God who only six weeks earlier had freed you from slavery — sort of like working for the food that perish-

es rather than for the food that endures for eternal life. They are two different ways of living, two different life orientations — one is self-centered, the other is God-focused.

And the Spirit of freedom in Christ Jesus is what liberates us to live for God and for our neighbors, rather than just for ourselves. Listen again to what Paul says about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:3-4) And what is “the just requirement of the law”? According to Paul (and Jesus, for that matter), “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” (Romans 13:9-10) And we know, “We love because God first loved us . . . since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:19, 11)

Even as we celebrate our independence as a nation tomorrow on the 4th of July, we still have much work to do to fulfill the ideals that the writers of the Declaration of Independence expressed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” One of the great challenges we have living in a free society is navigating the relationship between individual freedoms and the common good. And so, in the midst of our picnics and games and parades and fireworks tomorrow, it would be good if we would stop and re-commit ourselves to use the freedom we celebrate to seek the best interests and common good of everyone in our country.

As Christians gathered at the table, we realize our Christian faith is a lifetime journey of seeking to live for God and for our neighbor in the freedom of the Spirit. As Paul said to the Philippians, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12b-13) As we eat the bread and drink the cup at the table of celebration this morning, it would be good if we would stop and re-commit ourselves to use our freedom in Christ to live according to the Spirit in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. (Romans 8:4)

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” Come to the table and celebrate your freedom in Christ. Then, led by the Spirit of freedom, go and live out that freedom in Christ, loving God and loving neighbor. As Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

Let us pray: Life-giving God, we thank and praise you for all that you have done for us. Through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son,

we have been set free — free from the power of sin that leads to death, free to follow the leading of your Holy Spirit, free to love you with all our heart and soul and strength and mind, free to love our neighbors with the love of Jesus Christ. To you alone, life-giving God, belongs all praise and honor and glory and blessing, forever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information taken from Jim Worsham, “John Adams’s vision of July 4 was July 2,” July 2, 2014 at www.prologue.archives.gov.

²Paul Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 132.