

With July 4th, Independence Day, rapidly approaching, I feel the need to share some thoughts about freedom. I recall many years ago as a child, stories shared by my grandmother of her experiences raising my dad and his brother, while her husband was overseas during World War II. She told stories of her community coming together to ration supplies such as gasoline and other essential items. She recalled having to partially obscure the headlights on her car and put heavy curtains in the windows of her home out of fear that bombs from overhead would drop. She told me how the war caused shortages and that food was in short supply. She reflected on the monthly “ration books” that were issued containing removable stamps good for things like sugar, meat, cooking oil, and canned goods. She didn’t hesitate to let me know that once your ration stamps were used up for a month, you couldn’t buy anymore of that type of food. She spared no detail in describing the frugality and creativity needed in making sure there was enough food on the family’s table by the end of the month. I remember being just as fascinated by her homefront stories as I was with my grandfather’s war stories. Part of that fascination came from her telling of how everyone worked together with a common cause for the common good. Alas, I fear we have lost that sense today.

I have long lamented that our culture has either forgotten or has no knowledge whatsoever of the common good. Among the many strands of cultural DNA making up our society, is the toxic one of “rugged individualism” characterized by the gospel of self-reliance. Where I have seen this played out most recently are in the debates over whether we should be compelled to wear masks over our faces when in the public realm. The black and yellow flag proclaiming “Don’t Tread on Me” is provocatively displayed by some who want the world to know that in their freedom, no one can tell them what to do. Thanks to the Apostle Paul, as followers of Christ we know something about freedom. We know that freedom is not defined by lack of personal constraints. We know that with freedom come responsibility and accountability. Through the biblical witness of those who have come before us, we know that freedom is defined only in the context of community; There is no “I” in freedom.

Addressing a young church struggling to figure out freedom in the context of community Paul writes,

“Am I not free?... Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?... Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all...” (1 Corinthians 9).

I wear a mask over my face in public, because at this point this seems like the best way to keep you safe from a virus that in 4 months has killed over 120,000 of our fellow citizens. I maintain at least 6’ distance from others in public because I need to keep you safe from a lung-scarring virus that has infected at least 2 million Americans. Being told to wear a mask over my nose and mouth has nothing to do with personal freedom, and everything to do with serving the larger communal good.

When asked a long time ago what was most important to God, Jesus responded,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and...You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22).

The Lord I follow and love with all my heart modeled this kind of servanthood a long time ago on the hardwood of a cross. His love for the world compels my love for the world. Our well-being is collective, not personal. As a follower of Jesus, my freedom is not defined by what I am free “from” but what I am free “for.” In the cross and empty tomb of Christ, I am free to open my heart to your needs; I am free to look out for your well-being; I am free to make certain my actions do you no harm. In the cross and empty tomb of Christ, I am free to serve the common good and keep you safe by keeping my distance and wearing a mask in your presence.

Peace and Love,
Pastor Doug