

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 7, 2019

“For the Common Good”

Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. —Galatians 6: 9-10

What can I say? What does God want us to hear? . . . Listen again for the Word of God in St. Paul’s Letter to the churches in Galatia around 65 A.D.: “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

What does God want us to hear? What can I say on this Independence Day weekend? Listen again to the words proclaimed from the porch of Carpenter’s Hall in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [people] 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,” in more modern English, “the pursuit of that which makes life worthwhile.”

What word jumps out of both texts 1,700 year apart? What simple three-letter word jumps out of the text for today? “All.” “Let us work for the good of *all*,” St. Paul says. “. . . that all men, [meaning generically “all people”], “that all people are created equal. One text sent by sea to churches in the ancient region of Galatia, now modern Turkey, the other proclaimed by a Congress in Philadelphia to a group of 13 colonies at the birth of a nation. One to churches, one to a nation, one religious, one political. And, the common word to both church and state is “all.” “Let us work for the good of *all*,” the common good that “all people are created equal.” “All.”

There were some people in the Galatian churches who didn’t believe it. There were some who considered themselves superior because they were the circumcised. Obviously they all must have been men. I won’t elaborate! And there were the others, those “other” people who were part of the family of faith but were ostracized, other-ized, by the religiously pure and pious. They didn’t believe that all people—including women—were created equal and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of that which makes life worthwhile.”

Now, the proclamation from the porch in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776, is that a declaration of independence is for *all* people, not just some in some states, not just for those with a royal blood line, not just for those who were loyal to George III, not just for those who were born within the borders of a colony or even within the borders of 13 colonies. *All* people, all the estimated 2.5 million people in these 13 colonies. And, by the way, of those 2.5 million people in 1776, according to one historian, there were 1.9 million European settlers, 400,000 blacks (mainly slaves), and about 200,000 American Indians. That means over 90% of the people in the nation birthed on July 4, 1776, were immigrants, including my great, great, great grandfather, Conrad Mitman who emigrated from Heilbronn, Germany, to Tohickon Township in Bucks County in 1750. When the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed on July 4, 1776, most of those endowed by their Creation with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were immigrants, many fleeing oppression, religious intolerance, starvation, imprisonment, and military conscription.

There was a desire of the Commander in Chief of US Forces for a July 4, 2019, military show similar to that which is held every year in France on Bastille Day commemorating the beginning of the French Revolution with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. It is worthy to note that Bastille Day marks a violent revolution. The birth of a nation on July 4, 1776, was accomplished with the signatures of 56 men on a piece of paper and announced not with flyovers and tanks but with the ringing of a bell and town criers proclaiming “Hear ye, hear ye!” “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and “the pursuit of that which makes life worthwhile.” All people, not just some. Yes, a war for independence ensued, but it all began with the signatories of 56 brave men who put their names on paper.

Last year on this Independence Day weekend the hymns we were singing brought me to tears during the liturgy. In my mind was a split screen—on the one side the image of the statue of liberty with the engraved words of Emma Lazarus’ poem, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free,” and in the other screen the images of border authorities beginning prosecuting every adult who crossed the southwest border illegally, causing more than 2,300 children to be separated from their parents. That was on Independence Day, 2018. Earlier on June 14 (last year) Attorney General Jeff Sessions defended the policy by citing a Biblical passage from Apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws

of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order,” Sessions said. “Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and lawful.” Really? Children in cages and women told to drink water out of toilets?

So, a year later I have steeled myself to turn my emotion from tears into outrage over even far more horrific reports and photographs of filthy, overcrowded cages crowded with children—not in some far-off banana republic, but on the soil of the United States of America. I want to take a bell in hand and stand before the White House and Congress: “Hear ye! Hear ye! We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and “the pursuit of that which makes life worthwhile.” All people, all God’s children. The crisis this year is multiplied by hundreds, even thousands, or times over what made me weep last Independence Day weekend.

If all of this is to fulfill an election stump-speech promise or to ramp up the base for another campaign, it’s a moral outrage. This is not politics, dear sisters and brothers. It’s an outright assault on the Gospel and all Jesus came to give his life for--and an assault on the moral integrity of this nation and the courage of those who put pen to paper on July 4, 1776. To claim that it’s OK to put children in cages for political purposes and to put political opponents in jail is a moral outrage that should motivate us all to ring a liberty bell and shout aloud, “Hear ye! Hear ye! We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and “the pursuit of that which makes life worthwhile.” For *all* people, *all* God’s children.

Jesus sent out seventy, two by two, into places where he himself intended to go, sent them out with authority to teach, to preach, to heal, and to announce the nearness of the Kingdom of God. They weren’t issued military gear, nothing more than the very barest of essentials, totally dependent on the hospitality of others. This would not be an easy mission. He said, “I am sending you out like lambs amidst wolves.” Not a very safe environment for Jesus’ lambs.

Yet, they returned to base camp “with joy,” Luke says. Mission accomplished. It worked. "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" The Gospel works; even amidst wolves the Kingdom of God comes near. The seventy were almost giddy about their successes, but Jesus warned them not to take personal credit. The mystery is that the Gospel works, even amidst wolves, and God has a way of

calling forth bell-ringers to tell the truth to falsehoods, to set children in cages free, and calls forth “hear ye-criers” to proclaim that the Creator God demands that people, all people, be guaranteed their unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of that which makes life worthwhile. It’s not easy for truth-tellers to cry “Hear ye!” in a culture of lies. It’s not easy for speakers for God to cry “Hear ye!” in a culture of narcissism and self-interest. Yet, the ones who like lambs are sent amidst wolves whisper in our ears with Gospel gentleness: “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith,” for *all* God’s children, for the common good.”

F. Russell Mitman, Pastor
Parkside United Church of Christ
505 Main Street
Phoenixville, Pennsylvania 19426
frmitman@comcast.net