

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Most of you know, I would guess, that the Episcopal Church USA is a derivative of the Church of England; and so it shouldn't surprise you, when you think about it, that when we speak about the revolutionary war and celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, that the history of our church gets a little complicated. Certainly, there were many other denominations and expressions of religious faith in the 13 colonies, Puritans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Quakers, Roman Catholics, and so on. There were even some Jewish colonists, who for many years had been welcomed to practice their faith in Newport RI. But, as long as the British flag flew over colonial capitals, the established church, the Church of England, enjoyed a privileged status. This status was endorsed and upheld by the crown, since at that time, for better or worse, the king was the head of the church, the authority who certified the appointment of bishops, and could accept or veto the decisions of Parliament regarding church matters. On the one hand, this served to protect the Church from outside dangers, but on the other hand, left it vulnerable to tyranny from its own leadership. Such was the situation on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776.

Those who worshiped at the established church, which included many of the prominent Founding Fathers and Mothers of our nation, were caught in an outrageous paradox: The same church which encouraged them through the reading of scripture to proclaim that all are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights, was also the church where the weekly Prayers of the People included prayers for the health and success of king George III. There was often angry 'hissing' and the occasional loud 'Booing'. Imagine being the prelate whose fate it was to lead *those* prayers! In any case, by the end of the war, it was clear to church leaders that there was an immediate need for 're-branding.' Clergy and lay folk worked together during the 1780s to create a new, American church which, while it retained the best traditions, the liturgy, and sacramental opportunities of the 'Mother' Church, would in all important ways distance itself from its former establishment status. They invented an organization which had a constitution and canon laws appropriate for a democratic society, and actually finished their work before the Continental Congress was able to finish drafting the US Constitution, which many claim was modeled after the new Episcopal document.

And so, a refreshed church in the English tradition was born. One which was prepared for the new enforcement of religious freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, one in which the heritage of Anglican spirituality could thrive, and Apostolic succession could be continued, without being administered by a foreign government. One which by its founding documents, the Episcopal constitution and canons, reflected the concept of representative democracy, in keeping with the format chosen by the people of a new nation for all its legislative and administrative needs. Each parish elects a vestry, each vestry elects delegates to the annual diocesan convention, who help elect representatives to attend the General Convention of the whole church every three years, and then those representatives vote on the church's business, including electing the Presiding Bishop, who serves a nine year term

And through this uniquely American experience, the seeds of the Anglican Communion began to be sown. The churches in the Communion are generally defined by national boundary, are permitted to do and mind their own business, and yet are bound together by reformation heritage and common prayer. We all give a nod to the Archbishop of Canterbury as the convener of those common prayers, yet owe him no specific loyalty beyond that. We often pray for him and for the other churches of the Anglican Communion, not out of obligation, but out of love, out of a choice based in love which we are free to make. So, on July fourth, as we celebrate the inspiration and courage which gave us this new nation, we ought to also celebrate the freedom and faithfulness which gave us this Episcopal Church.

Freedom is a core value in the Good News Jesus reveals to us. Jesus never coerces anyone except evil

spirits, not even the disciples, into doing his will; he always offers a choice. Well, in fairness, he does give instructions and commands, but the disciples always have the option of saying 'no.' The incarnate Christ discloses a God who, though called a king, is never a tyrant. Our Anglican theology can be probably reduced to three simple statements: God is Love. Love has immense power. And love has intent. But that intent is not, I don't think, to teach us punishing lessons. I think that the intent of Love, or Grace...unconditional love... is to use its immense power to create, to forgive, to redeem, and to give even more freedom: freedom from addiction, for example, or freedom from sadness, from discouragement, from hopelessness, from boredom. God, who is love, intends to use the power inherent in love to heal and restore to wholeness.

But it is our choice. Jesus is in his hometown, and preaches, as is his habit, about God's love and fidelity. But because of a certain bias, many of the people there don't find him credible. Okay, that's their choice. It surprises Jesus; Mark says he is, in fact, amazed. Mind you, he is used to crowds pressing in on him just to touch his cloak. But he doesn't condemn his neighbors, he doesn't use the immense power that love has given him to punish them. Rather, he philosophizes to himself about prophets not being accepted in their hometown, does what he can, and goes on his way. They have the freedom, freedom of choice, a gift from the Holy Spirit, to ignore the opportunities he has offered. So be it.

As part of his mission, he decides to send the 12 disciples out two-by-two to spread the Word. They are to go simply, as messengers with a focused purpose. And when they are received into a household they are to remain there, modeling God's love and its immense power, for as long as they are welcome. Should that household choose freely to discern the intent of God's grace, then they should supervise the healing which will naturally take place. If the house refuses, using their gift of freedom, to consider God's intent, God's will, then the disciples should not waste any more time, but leave there, shaking the dust off their feet to testify that they have been permitted no power in that place, and move on. Mark records that they did, in fact, have much success, bringing physical and emotional healing to many. The underlying message of these two anecdotes, I think, is that the creator endows us with the right, the freedom, to say yes or no, and while there are clearly advantages to saying 'yes,' all begins with the free choice of how to answer.

Some time ago, I had a brief conversation with a man I have known for some time, but hadn't seen since I was ordained a priest. His teenage children were with him, and I shook hands warmly all around. I was wearing my clerical collar, and he commented that I was in my 'uniform', and I responded that, yes, the collar kept me free from ticks and fleas for up to 90 days. The teenagers didn't get the joke...I'm not sure they had ever seen anyone with a collar before up-close. In response to my humor, the man said 'well, I'm certainly not a Christian; I would never take my children into a church.' While I was busy thinking that this was kind of a random comment, the daughter said: 'No way, I've never been in a church!' the father, who is a county supervisor in Northern California, went on to say that, yes, he thought there was something more to life, but that he would never belong to any organized religion. He pointed to a nearby pine tree, and said: 'now, I believe that tree is there...I can see it. But holy spirits and such, no way.' I felt like quoting 'only God can make a tree' but instead I just smiled and nodded.

He went on to say that in his political career people often asked him if he believed as a Christian, and that that offended him. I really wanted to say...'now stop, I bet you say that to all your clergy friends!' My feelings were hurt. There didn't seem to be any reason for him to launch into such a deprecating tirade. But, I kept reminding myself that he had, as an inalienable right, the gift to question my faith, and that my only response should be to model the things faith had taught me. God's great law of liberty is a core value of the Gospel; God has a will, but God is not a tyrant. We grow and mature not by coercion, but by reflecting on our choices, and his tirade made me wonder if he might be having second thoughts. Or not. In any case, it is not my place to judge. For the moment, I shake the dust off my feet and move on...the rest is up to God. Meanwhile, let us celebrate the Liberty which is our birthright; Let us give thanks to God for this exceptional nation and the amazing freedoms we enjoy. Amen.