

Liberty vs. Freedom Readings: Deut. 10:12-21; Mt. 5:43-48 July 4th, 2021
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Today we celebrate the 245th anniversary of our nation's founding; the day on which the Declaration of Independence from British rule was signed by 56 courageous and self-sacrificing leaders. It reads: "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... That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government..." (Declaration of Independence) What exactly is liberty and how does it differ from freedom? This is the subject of today's sermon.

The terms "freedom" and "liberty" have frequently been used interchangeable. This can cause a great deal of confusion because their definitions are actually quite different. Liberty is predominantly an external construct. It is the state of being free within a society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views. Freedom on the other hand, is an internal construct, a "condition that exists within your mind." It is the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

Having been brought up and educated in Boston, liberty was something I treasured. I believed that the Boston Tea Party was a seminal event in the life of our country and so the words of the early patriots always rang in my ears: "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" (Patrick Henry) After the Revolutionary War and the ratification of the Constitution, the founding fathers extended personal liberties by adding the Bill of Rights to the Constitution a few years later. These amendments guaranteed essential rights and civil liberties, such as the freedom of religion, the right to free speech, the right to protest, the right to bear arms, trial by jury, and reserving rights to the people and the states. I am forever grateful for these liberties and feel blessed to live in this country.

The Bill of Rights seemed to be written in a language that excluded no one, but in fact, it was not intended to protect all the people - whole groups were left out. For instance, women were still considered second class citizens, essentially the property of their husbands. Native Americans were entirely left outside the constitutional system, defined as an alien people in their own land. For the first 78 years after it was ratified, the Constitution protected slavery and legalized racial subordination.

Even after the arrival of the 20th century, racial segregation remained legal and pervaded all aspects of American society. Gender discrimination was firmly institutionalized and workers were arrested for labor union activities. Legal immigrants were deported for their political views and members of minority religions were victims of persecution. Since that time, much has been accomplished in extending liberties in our country to minorities and those on the margins of society. However, the struggle is not over. Ironically, it is this struggle for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that is dividing our country today as the #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers, and the LBGTQ movements gain momentum. It is into this context of striving for justice and the dignity of every human being that we are assigned today's passage from the Book of Deuteronomy. Let's take a closer look.

In this reading, Moses lays out a social order built on an ethical system which includes caring for those on the margins of society. As the Israelites are about to settle in the land beyond the Jordan, Moses tells them: "The Lord your God... executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10) The Hebrew word *ger* is translated as *stranger* but can also be translated as *alien* or *sojourner*. This classification of *stranger* also included the landless, the needy, the destitute, and people who originated from other countries. Bottom line is, God loves the stranger. And if we Christians claim to love and obey God, then we too must learn love the stranger and the alien who live among us. Remember, almost all of us here today are descendants of strangers to this land.

This Hebrew ethic of love for the stranger is reflected on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty. The Statue was given to the United States in 1884 by the French as a sign of their mutual desire for liberty. It reads: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp

beside the golden door!" And while our country has never fully realized these ideals, let us not grow weary in treating the stranger among us with compassion and dignity.

While liberty was the focus of our nation's struggle for independence, freedom is the focus of our life in Christ. 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) Paul tells the Galatians, "For freedom, Christ has set us free." (Gal. 5:1) This kind of freedom is an internal construct where to be free is to be able to take ownership of what goes on inside your heart and mind.

Viktor Frankl, who survived the Holocaust, wrote about this inner sense of freedom in his book, Man's Search For Meaning. Frankl tells the story of how he survived four concentration camps by finding personal meaning in this experience, which gave him the will to live through it. He said: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances..." While the freedom to act in a certain way can be taken away from you – your attitude about your circumstances cannot. It is with this understanding of inner freedom that we read today's very challenging gospel taken from the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus said to the crowd: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5:43-44) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets forth God's vision of a new world where genuine and unconditional love is the operating principle. It is a blueprint for a different kind of society where anger, hatred, retaliation, and war have no place; where destructive human relationships come to an end. It is a call to stop the vicious cycle of violence and enemy making; where we no longer fight fire with fire but rather quench fire with water.

This is a vision of inner freedom, where we are able to rise above our human tendency to retaliate, rise above our negative emotions, rise above our bodily cravings, rise above our addictions, rise above our sinful impulses, rise above our painful memories, and rise above our past traumas to become the children of God to which we have been called. This is the difficult spiritual work that we need to embrace in order to be set free. And while we cannot accomplish this task of transformation on our ego strength alone, we must focus on ways to open ourselves up to God's grace. For it is only grace (not reason or laws or will power) that will ultimately release us from the bondage of all that harms the creatures of God.

While most Americans think of freedom as being able to determine the direction and shape of their life, Christian freedom is allowing the Spirit of Christ to determine the direction and shape of our life. Imagine being free from the constant pursuit of worldly goods and comforts, being satisfied instead with simple basic needs. Imagine being free from prejudice, uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and contempt toward those who differ from us. Imagine being free from anger at our own frustration and from those who do not meet our expectations. Imagine being free from the pursuit of bigger, better, and more, using our precious energies instead to care for mother earth. Imagine living in harmony with all of God's creature, enjoying their beauty rather than defending our territory. This is the kind of freedom that is promised to those who abide in Christ. This is the kind of freedom that sustains our joy and allows us to pursue a life of true happiness. Christian freedom is achieved by a self-sacrificial love, where *me*, *myself*, and *I* give way to love of God and love of neighbor.

Have you ever wondered what happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence? Five were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons serving in the Revolution and nine fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War. Personal sacrifice was part and parcel of the struggle for our nation's liberties just as personal sacrifice is part and parcel of Christian freedom.

And so we continue to seek grace as we pray: "Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace: Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." (BCP 258)