

6 Pentecost – B/4th of July 2015

Ezekiel 2:1-5

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

The text for the sermon is from the gospel: He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

I did my graduate work at the University of Virginia, what is always referred to as Thomas Jefferson’s “Academical Village” because he designed it. And of course, what we didn’t do was refer to Thomas Jefferson by his first and his last name. He was always call “Mr. Jefferson.” And none of our professors went by the traditional honorific of “professor” or “doctor,” either, since if a simple “Mr.” was good enough for Mr. Jefferson, “Mr.” or “Ms” was good enough for our professors. Now, that digression aside, I don’t think it is possible to hear these words of Mr. Jefferson without feeling a great stirring in our hearts:

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 to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — 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, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security

Now--along with enjoying our sparklers, hanging out Old Glory and gathering around our grills this weekend, we do well to read Mr. Jefferson’s famous words all the way through.

It is good to read—or to hear; it’s great oratory--The Declaration of Independence if for no other reason than to be reminded of what the shapers of this nation sought. They were not seeking blind obedience to an unchangeable set of rules. They weren’t after a might-makes-right mentality (in fact, they were trying to get away from that one with the British). Instead, they sought an opportunity to be thoughtfully self-governing, rather than exploited by a richer, stronger nation who saw, in the colonies’ resources, much that could benefit Britain—if only the colonists could be managed.

Well, they couldn’t be managed. The colonists were driven by a dream. But not a fanciful dream: Jefferson says, “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.”

The Declaration shows us that even before the United States was the United States, there was a hope that here, in this land, there would be the option for self-governance and the option for freedom to live as men and women chose.

In our times, a certain kind of conservative Christianity and a certain kind of American politics seem strangely wedded to each other. A few years back, Newsweek ran a cross-wrapped stars-and-stripes on its cover. And “God bless the United States” has become the *de rigueur* tag line to end all political speeches, the way a preacher ends a sermon with “Amen.”

I’m sure that, in honor of the Fourth, some have raised glasses to toast the Supreme Court’s ruling, as I did. But others will be wringing hands and claiming that both God’s word and the Constitution have been besmirched. Indeed, in last Sunday’s sermon I cited Republican presidential hopeful Bobby Jindal saying that this was “an all-out assault against the religious freedom rights of Christians who disagree with this decision.”

And though I never thought I’d be favorably quoting Jeb Bush, his response to the Supreme Court ruling seems to me to be consistent with the vision espoused by Jefferson. Bush wrote, “In a country as diverse as ours, good people who have opposing views should be able to live side by side.”

That seems to me to underscore the deeper meaning in The Declaration. If Jefferson was declaring our need for independence from Britain, he was also underscoring our interdependence with one another.

As Christians we are governed first by a declaration of *interdependence*. We are called to recognize that we live a common life, a communal life—with our neighbors here, as well as our neighbors far away. As Christians governed first by a declaration of *interdependence*, we seek the *imago dei*, the image of God, that is imprinted on all human beings.

And to seek to find that *imago dei* is a lifelong process of continuing to see the “other” not as “other” but as brother or sister. I think that’s virtually an evolutionary process (this is a progressive church so I can use that word here, right?).

For example, let’s get back to Thomas Jefferson. Great as the man was, and virtually no one disputes this, Mr. Jefferson himself was a slave-holder. This is widely known, as it is also widely known and virtually certain that after his wife’s death, he fathered six children with his slave, Sally Hemings, whose brother, James Hemings travelled with Jefferson to Paris where he was trained as a French chef and served the president as such, receiving his freedom from Jefferson in 1796.

Now Jefferson’s views on slavery were pretty clear: he opposed it. And indeed he argued that it was “moral depravity” and a “hideous blot,” as well as the greatest threat to the survival of the new American nation. Jefferson also thought that slavery was contrary to the laws of nature, which decreed that everyone had a right to personal liberty. These views were radical in a world where unfree labor was the norm.

And indeed, in an attempt to erode Virginians’ support for slavery, he discouraged the cultivation of crops heavily dependent on slave labor—tobacco—and encouraged the introduction of crops that needed little or no slave labor—wheat, sugar maples, short-grained rice, olive trees, and wine grapes. But by the 1800s, Virginia’s most valuable commodity and export was neither crops nor land, but slaves.

So we have to hold in our brains the cognitive dissonance that comes from knowing that the man who called for a government promoting “such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness” of its citizens was himself not living his life to promote the “Safety and Happiness” of slaves.

But we evolve over time. Thomas Jefferson wanted slavery abolished, but he wanted the slaves deported to another country where they would be self-governing. He believed that white Americans and enslaved blacks constituted two “separate nations” who could not live together peacefully in the same country. So the American slaves’ deportation—whether to Africa or the West Indies—was an essential consequence of emancipation.

Today we see that view for what it is: simply racist.

And we must name it for what it is; then it was contextualized by its historical setting. Today it is unacceptable and should be condemned.

God-willing, we evolve in how we grow to see the *imago dei* in each other. So that, in 1967, in Loving versus Virginia, the Supreme Court struck down laws preventing inter-racial marriage. Legally, this was a landmark civil rights decision; theologically, it was a step toward seeing the *imago dei* that transcends skin color.

And the recent Supreme Court ruling can be viewed through similar frame of reference. Legally, it is a landmark civil rights decision. But theologically, it is also a way to say that we are all made in the image of God and that one person hasn't the right to deny the rights of another.

Now--we know by now that many who self-identify as Christians are up in arms about this decision (and “up in arms” is never a good thing for Christians to be). We know, as well, where we stand on this position and certainly our status as a RIC church, our participation in Pride and our support of all persons’ full humanity. Knowing where we stand, knowing of Christ’s radical hospitality for all people, knowing of our interdependence as human beings, then we are called by Jesus, just as he called his disciples: “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”

In other words, we are called to announce the gospel of Christ’s love. But we are not called to try to understand when that gospel is turned into an instrument for oppression, shame or the denial of rights. We don’t have to say “oh, but we all believe more or less the same thing” when the fact is, we don’t. And it’s time to shake the dust off our shoes as a testimony against those who would use the Bible to oppress, shame or deny another’s full humanity.

The Declaration calls us to live a common life with one another, promoting each other’s “Safety and Happiness.” And the love of God compels us to bring the good news that Jesus came to bring life and to bring life abundantly to all.

As a nation and as a Christian, the calling to do so and the opportunity remain ours.

Amen.