

## ***Proclaiming Liberty***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Communion Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
July 2, 2017  
Text: Isaiah 61:1-4

When I think of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday, or Independence Day by its official name, I don't know about you but I usually don't think about its significance in the history of our country. I mean, I know it celebrates our independence from Great Britain and that it is connected to the Revolutionary War, but what it really signifies is not something I think about very much. I don't think many of us do. It's just a great holiday that comes the first week of July. What it really signifies for most of us is the way it stands for everything we love about summer instead of what we love about our country. We love 4<sup>th</sup> of July cookouts with family and friends and spending the days outdoors doing all of our favorite outdoor activities like swimming and boating and golfing and hiking, etc. We love the fireworks (unless we have pets who are terrified of them – then we hate fireworks). We love the outdoor concerts filled with patriotic music, especially if they end with the 1812 Overture timed perfectly with the fireworks. In short, we love the 4<sup>th</sup> of July because it stands for everything that's right about America, everything that's good about America, everything we love about America. Am I right? (*pause for responses*)

And that's great. Really, it is. I have so many happy memories of July 4<sup>th</sup> – setting off roman candles at the end of our dock at the lake house, going to see the community fireworks at the high school football stadium, and I'll never forget the time Peter's brother took us to see the fireworks in Washington, DC from the top of the FDIC building. What a memory for us and for our kids! But, wonderful as these memories are, they do not really help us to understand the real significance of this holiday.

So, when was the last time you really sat down and thought about the real reason behind the Independence Day holiday? I'm thinking it's been a while. Let's make the time to remember it together it today. First of all, Independence Day is the anniversary of the day the Declaration of Independence was formally adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776 at the Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It was not the beginning of the Revolutionary War. That had already been underway for more than a year when the Declaration of Independence was formally adopted. This document was a formal declaration that the 13 colonies were declaring themselves to be independent sovereign states who were coming together to form a new nation, the United States of America. The most important line in the Declaration of Independence is usually thought to be: "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.”

This statement over time has come to be seen as the moral standard which the United States should always strive to embody. Important to recall too is that the Declaration of Independence is not part of the Constitution, although the two are inextricably linked. One simply could not exist without the other.

So, what does all this have to do with us, sitting here in our church on a Sunday morning of the Independence Day weekend? A lot, I think, because the concept which underlies the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution is also a key concept for Christianity. That concept is liberty or freedom. The text we read this morning from Isaiah makes clear that liberty is part and parcel of the lives God always intended his faithful to have. “... the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...” Isaiah is clearly saying here that part of what we are to do as people who love and serve God is to proclaim liberty! It is a key part of the other tasks we have been assigned as those who seek to serve God through the way we live our lives. And what are those other tasks? Isaiah has a list: Bringing good news to the oppressed and bind up the brokenhearted; to comfort those who mourn. Wow. That sounds pretty daunting. How do we do all that exactly? And how does

this proclaiming of liberty line up with the kind of liberty and freedom we associate with being citizens of this great country?

I think it will be helpful at this point to consider the actual meaning of these two words as we ponder how these two spheres – citizenship and membership in the household of God – are related. According to Webster's, freedom is defined as “the quality or state of being free as in the absence of necessity, coercion or constraint in choice or action.” It also refers to being free in the sense of being liberated from slavery or restraint or from the power of another. Liberty, which is considered a synonym for freedom, is defined as “the power to do as one pleases; the freedom from physical restraint or arbitrary or despotic control.” Even though liberty and freedom are synonyms, there are subtle, nuanced differences between them. Freedom has a broad range of meaning and may imply a total absence of restraint, even as required by necessity. In other words, you are free to act recklessly, dangerously, unkindly, and so on. The only person who can really reign you in from your wanton application of freedom to yourself is yourself. Liberty, on the other hand, implies the power to choose what one does or says as distinguished from a lack of inhibition in doing or say something. Liberty implies a release from restraint or compulsion. In other words, liberty and your understanding of it is what allows you to give in to a complete lack of inhibition as you

consider yourself free to do and say whatever you want. Freedom, then, is a state of being while liberty is the way in which you choose to enact that state of being free in your life each day.

So, with this understanding of liberty, how do we now understand what Isaiah is saying when he talks about God's servants being anointed to proclaim liberty to the captives? I think Isaiah is talking about reminding people that they are, in fact, free to choose their relationship with God. They are free to choose to love God or be angry with God or be joyful in God, or simply to walk away from God. Proclaiming liberty to God's people is, then, reminding them that they are in fact, God's people. They always have been and they always will be. But, how they live as beloved of God is always a choice. Will they choose the self-imposed restraint that is inherent in liberty or will they maximize their freedom by behaving as though God's expectations for them don't matter?

Isaiah's views on this are clear. He believes that living as a person beloved of God, cherished by God does provide a unique kind of freedom, but that with that freedom comes substantial responsibility. We are responsible for making the effort to bring good news to the oppressed and to bind up the broken-hearted. The good news for the oppressed is that oppression is not now nor has it ever been God's plan for them. Instead God and God's beloved who are able to do so are to work to relieve that

oppression by whatever means they can. And as they are working to relieve oppression, they are also binding up the broken-hearted through acts of kindness, compassion, justice and love every day. Whether it makes sense or not. Whether it seems possible or not.

Now we come to that point where we think about these concepts of liberty and freedom as it relates to our being citizens of our country, as well as members of the household of God. This is where it gets tricky because folks get nervous when these two realms try to interact with each other. Separation of church and state is the underlying principle here, but that itself has come into question recently as some folks think their free exercise of religion entitles them to do all sorts of mean spirited things because their religion tells them to. I don't think that was what the framers intended when they wrote these two amazing documents almost three centuries ago. But the debate about just what "freedom of religion" means is way beyond the scope of this sermon. What we can talk about and what we must talk about is what it means to exercise our God-given freedom as people beloved of God while we are living our lives in the world each day. It goes back to that nuanced difference between freedom and liberty. We are free to be whom God created us to be but it is the choices we make along the way that will show who we really are. Do we exercise our liberty as people of God in a way that makes God and God's love more visible to people we encounter each day? Or, do we exercise

our liberty in such a way that people would find not even a glimpse of Jesus' wisdom and love in what we do or say? Do we proclaim God's liberty to be fully whom God created you to be through our own lives each day? Or, do we proclaim the selfish liberty that says we can do and say whatever we want?

I think Abraham Lincoln understood this complicated relationship between freedom and liberty, between choice and responsibility, between God's will and human will, better than any other President this country has ever had. He insisted that the Declaration of Independence should be the lens through which the Constitution should be read and interpreted. In other words, the concepts of freedom and liberty for all who have been created equal by God must always be the benchmark to which the country is held. Nowhere is this more clear than in the final paragraph of his Second Inaugural Address in 1865, delivered shortly before he was assassinated. He said,

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Sounds an awful lot like Isaiah to me. And it also sounds like

what our country needs at this moment when we have never been more divided, except perhaps during the Civil War, the very war to which Lincoln is referring in his powerful, challenging words.

Dear friends, God is challenging us to proclaim liberty to ourselves and to everyone we know. God is challenging us to dare to use our freedom to advocate for justice for all, and malice toward none. God is challenging us to do the right thing, the righteous thing, when the temptation to do only what serves ourselves is so great. God is challenging us on this Independence Day weekend to do what we can to bind up the nation's wounds and our own. God needs us to embody the liberty, the freedom to choose whose we are and how we live as the Beloved people of God we were created to be. May it be so. Happy 4<sup>th</sup>! Amen.