

Proclaiming Liberty

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
& Celebrating Independence Day

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

July 4, 2021

Text: Isaiah 61:1-4

This is a sermon I first preached here on July 4th Weekend in 2018, three years ago. It is hard to imagine how much has changed in our country in such a short time and yet my hope is that this sermon still rings true. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this following worship...

“Give me liberty or give me death!” When we here in the US think about proclaiming liberty, this is generally what we think of – Patrick Henry ending his fiery speech to the Second Virginia Convention meeting in St. John’s Church in Richmond, Virginia on March 23, 1775. Delivering his impassioned speech to a packed house which included two future Presidents – George Washington and Thomas Jefferson – historians agree that Henry’s fiery words played a key role in convincing the Convention’s participants to pass the resolution before it declaring Virginia to be one of the United Colonies declaring independence from Great Britain. While there is some dispute as to the exact words, scholars agree that Patrick Henry’s impassioned proclaiming of liberty on this day was a pivotal turning point on the road leading to the Independence Day holiday we celebrate today.

Ironically, the proclaiming of liberty in this country in recent years has taken on a very different feel from what Patrick Henry likely had in mind as he rose to speak on that fateful day. He was talking about what has long been the conventional American understanding of liberty as personal freedom exercised responsibly within the confines of a civil society. He was talking about liberty from taxes which benefited the King and his cronies but was only a hardship in the Colonies. He was talking about the right of the people in the Colonies to make their own decisions about how they wanted to live and work instead of having them dictated by a monarch who knew nothing about them or this raw, wild land in which they were building something new and different, the likes of which the world had never seen before. The Declaration of Independence articulated this vision in these

words familiar to every citizen of this country: “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.”

I don't know about you, but when I have listened to the news over these last few years, which frankly I do not do all that often, I am dismayed by folks on both sides of the political divide and their screaming banshee reactions to things important and mundane. I worry that we have completely lost sight of what matters. We have lost sight of the grand and glorious vision which gave birth to this country almost 250 years ago. Too many seem to have forgotten that the original intent of this nation's forming was to create a new kind of nation where all kinds of opinions and perspectives were welcome, where everyone willing to work hard would be given a chance to build a life in which all they had to worry about was their own individual pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. I know I am not the only one saddened that this grand and glorious vision for a nation which values all people equally has been obscured from our sight by yet more gun violence, yet more unarmed black men being assaulted, yet more immigrants huddling in fear, yet more extreme weather wreaking havoc. I know I am not the only one whose heart is breaking as we witness the fracturing of the American dream.

What happened to us? How did we get here? Setting aside for a moment that women were explicitly left out of the original articulation of the dream that was to become the United States of America, how did we go from the radical statement that all men are created equal as a founding principle to hateful language used routinely and publicly by some to describe anyone different? Well, that's *the* question isn't it? And I'm betting each of you has thoughts on this question and I'm also betting those thoughts might not be all that different from each other's even though your politics might be very different. No worries! I'm not going to speak about politics. That's not my role or my function nor is it a smart thing for any clergy person to do. That being said, there are issues and there are times when the church cannot be silent in the face of certain actions without

betraying the faith it proclaims. The abolitionist movement is probably the best example of the church speaking out, confronting the sin of slavery being condoned by the government at that time. It was the churches of the North daring to name slavery as sin loud and long that eventually led to its abolition in the midst of a brutal civil war. It was churches who sponsored escaped slaves to come and talk about their experiences which awakened so many to the horrors of an institution so many others regarded as reflective of God's will for an inferior race. No wonder we still struggle with slavery's legacy of racism 150 years later.

So where am I going with all this? And what do Isaiah's words we read this morning have to do with it all? I wanted us to pause to reflect this morning on this Independence Day Sunday on the state of our nation at this moment in her history. So many of us are fearful of what we have witnessed in recent years in this country, of incendiary language and racist attitudes toward people of color, people who are different, becoming normalized. So many of us are weary of the seemingly unending chaos of one crisis after another endlessly repeated on the 24 hours news cycle. And let's keep things simple by not even throwing Covid into the mix of this conversation. Our heads are spinning and our hearts are aching and we worry what's next. Anxiety has become a permanent state of existence, a very far cry from lives devoted to the pursuit of happiness envisioned by the Founding Fathers. Dear friends, I'm tired of living that way and I suspect you are too.

This is where our friend Isaiah can point us in the right direction to get ourselves moving forward once more in that pursuit of happiness. Isaiah too talks about proclaiming liberty. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me," he says. Well, you'd expect that of a prophet, wouldn't you? But he doesn't stop there. He continues, "... because the Lord has anointed me ... to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners." Let's stop and think about that for a moment. What Isaiah is saying here is simply extraordinary. God is telling him – a prophet, his messenger – to *do* something in the face of systemic injustice. Isaiah, and by extension all those who hear his words, are to *do* something more than just feeling bad about the situation and the people it is affecting. He is to bring them good

news of God's love. He is to ease their broken hearts. He is to proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners.

Okay, fine, we think. Pretty words. Nice thoughts, but what does any of that have to do with me? I've had a little experience bringing good news to people, and that's nice. I've even sat with people whose hearts are breaking due to a situation encountered. And I know that was a good thing to do. I know it meant a lot to me when someone did it for me. But, really, I can't proclaim liberty to anyone! I can't release prisoners! I don't even know what that means!!! ... Maybe, maybe not. It all depends on what we're thinking of when we think about proclaiming liberty and releasing prisoners.

Here's a thought. What if the person you are proclaiming liberty to is yourself? What if the prisoner you are releasing is YOU? Let me explain. So much of our fear and anxiety, our worries about the future – for ourselves and our family as well as for our country – have to do with our inability to fix things so they are the way we want them to be, the way we think they should be. But we can't quickly or easily fix this situation which has developed over decades. We can't wave a magic wand and make the world safe from climate change and pollution nor we can pretend there is no problem. We can't fix the people who love to make us crazy. We can't solve anything by refusing to see or hear another point of view on the same problem. We can't ignore the problems we see around us but neither can we realistically fix them on our own. We want to "pull an ostrich" and just stick our heads in the sand and wait for everything to blow over so the world goes back to what it was. But we can't do that either.

So, what if the liberty we are proclaiming is freedom from the anger and fear that dances at the edges of every news story? What if we dare to proclaim liberty to ourselves so that we can really see God's beloved people in the center of so many of these issues instead of the ideology that wants to brand them as one thing or another? What if we release ourselves from being prisoners of our own prejudices and fears so that we can hear each other into speech about the problems this country and our world face? What if we dare to listen to the other side of the argument, any argument, not to be convinced but to understand? What if we dare to reach beyond our own self-imposed boundaries and limitations to become who God

needs us to be in the midst of a hurting world – purveyors of hope, light and determination that with God all things are possible.

Isaiah talks about what can happen if we are able to do all this, by the way. If we are able to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor ... to comfort those who mourn ... [with] the oil of gladness ... and the mantle of praise for a faint spirit,” then we will become a special people. A very special people who are part of God’s plan for the future of the whole world. If we care about people, Isaiah says, really care about them as people beloved of God in their own right, then we can make a difference for them and for ourselves. And if we do this and become these “oaks of righteousness” as Isaiah calls them, then we will be able to build up our ancient ruins. We will move beyond problems and devastations to become repairers of the ruined. And if we can do this, if we can become those who build up and repair our society and our world rather than those who want to tear it apart, then we will have created a solid foundation for all the generations to follow. Dear friends, Isaiah is reminding us that if we become part of the solution instead of part of the problem, then we will have become the people God created us to be, the people God needs us to be.

This is not easy and I am not saying it is. Proclaiming liberty for ourselves or for others is still as dangerous and as difficult as it was when Patrick Henry shouted it from a pulpit in Virginia. Daring to believe a better way is possible is still as much hard work as it was when the Colonies decided to become a new nation. It requires us to confront wrong-doing and sin when we see it even as we speak the truth in love to those with whom we disagree. It requires us, so far as it is possible, to live in peace with each other even as we recognize the grave injustices, the urgent problems, all around us and do what we can to repair those ruins. And, as we do, Isaiah reminds us, we are to hold on to God’s promise that we as God’s beloved people are up to any challenge when we recognize the spirit of the Lord God is within us, calling us forward, daring us to be more than we thought we could be, do more than we thought we could do. ... That is our challenge and our call from God, dear ones. Easy? NO! But, as my dad always said to me when I complained about something being difficult – “if it was easy, anybody could do it. And you’re not just anybody. You’re you.” May it be so, God. Amen.