

## ***Called to Freedom***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
July 3, 2022 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
INDEPENDENCE DAY WEEKEND!  
Text: Galatians 5:13-14

It's been one heck of a week leaving us all to wonder what is going on in our country on the eve of our most venerated civic holiday – Independence Day. Jenee Osterheldt, a columnist for the *Boston Globe*, offered an intriguing perspective in her column published on July 1. She posits that at this moment in history, “personal liberty over collective freedom is a crisis of America’s conscious.”<sup>1</sup> She goes on to explain her observation that at this moment in time in the United States, “it’s all about individuals. One’s personal belief become the priority over all else. It’s about us”<sup>2</sup> but as a collection of individuals. The notion of the needs or the welfare of the common good is nowhere in sight. It literally has no place in this notion of exceptionalism, the notion that any one individual’s wants requires that their personal freedom to do whatever they want is more important than everybody else, anybody else. As Osterheldt observes, “this is not liberty. This is power.”<sup>3</sup> How ironic that on this holiday celebrating freedom and independence, liberty and justice for all – the watchwords of American culture – we are wondering if we are witnessing its demise at the hands of the very Supreme Court intended to protect those very things. I do not believe I am alone in thinking our beloved country is at a moment of crisis. Surely we are. And what better place for us to reflect on this frightening reality together than in this, God’s sanctuary.

Dear ones, lest you fear I am sinking into the quagmire of bringing politics into this pulpit, let me assure you I am not. Even though I can see why some might think that is the case. Last week we

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<sup>1</sup> Jenee Osterheldt, “The Declaration of American Individualism,” *The Boston Globe*, July 1, 2022.  
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/07/01/metro/declaration-american-individualism/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

reflected together about the unthinkable overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court. I encouraged us to ponder together our anger and dismay was not because we believe abortion is a good thing in every circumstance. It most definitely is not. But the *Hobbs* decision wasn't really about abortion. It was about stripping women in certain states of control over their own bodies. Our hearts are still aching over that. Our minds are still spinning over all the ramifications of this historic decision and filled with worry over what might come next from this runaway Supreme Court working hard to codify the legal dreams of a few while they have the chance.

Well, we didn't have long to wait for that answer did we. This past week, the last week of their term thank God, they issued another round of mind-numbing radical decisions. They stripped Native Americans of even more of the few rights they have with a decision that gave states more power over tribal land. They expanded gun rights by overturning a New York State law seeking to restrict the right of individuals to carry concealed guns. This barely two weeks after the Uvalde school shooting left 21 dead, most of them children. They restricted the EPA's ability to regulate pollution thereby making it impossible for the US to meet the needed carbon reduction goals of the Paris Accords to combat climate change. This decision literally puts everyone in danger from the extreme climate change we have so little time to address. And they overruled a Maine law that did not allow parents receiving state taxpayer assistance for tuition to use that money for their children to attend religious schools. Now that state money can be used to pay for a religious education. No separation of church and state there at all. Added to all this, we learned as their term ended that the Court has even more taken-for-granted rights in their sights for their next term.

So, why am I talking about the Supreme Court again this week? How is this not about politics? For one thing, my talking about the Supreme Court in a sermon should not even be political in the first

place because the Supreme Court itself is supposed to be above politics and nonpartisan. It never has been, certainly, but that was always the ideal, always the hope and expectation. But, agreeing that this could be seen as a political subject, why am I addressing it here in this way this morning – as a sermon from this pulpit? Because all of these decisions are couched in conservative evangelical theology and belief. In other words, these decisions are about the practice of one very narrow version of one particular faith tradition – Evangelical Christianity – taken to the extreme and now codified into law it will take years, decades to undo. The faith based reasoning behind this is in essence telling us what we as Christians should believe. It is therefore incumbent upon us to understand and explore how our practice of the Christian faith is so different from this perspective which is not only dangerous but downright wrong. And it's wrong because the First Amendment says it is. This is what the Amendment says:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”<sup>4</sup>

Often referred to as the “Establishment Clause,” this amendment specifically provides for the free exercise of religion. Throughout the course of American history, that has always been interpreted as meaning each of us is free to believe what we choose, practice our faith as we choose, and we are free not to believe in anything at all if that is our preference.

Now, this interpretation is being challenged directly through this individual exceptionalism which Osterheldt writes about. The ultra-conservative Christian belief that life begins at the moment of conception is what is driving the campaign against abortion. This same ultra conservative brand of Christianity also believes, even

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<sup>4</sup> <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>

though it will never be admitted out loud, that people of color are not as worthy as white people because their darker skin is “the mark of Cain” from the Cain and Abel story in the bible. So, no problem with taking rights away from Native Americans, or immigrants or Blacks, or ... This brand of Christianity also believes we should not be worrying about climate change because the End of Days is coming anyway so we should make the most of the earth’s resources while we can because God did give humans “dominion” over it. Yikes.

So, if you are wondering why I am bringing all this seeming political stuff into our pulpit it’s because I feel I have no choice. If so much of this radical change in how the government says we can live our lives comes from one particular form of radically conservative Christian belief, then I must respond to it from this pulpit. Not all the time. Not every Sunday. I couldn’t stomach that myself. But on this Sunday, when we are gathering to remember our history and celebrate the founding of this first of the great world democracies, I could think of nothing more important for me to talk about with you than this. So here we are. The other thing is that the bible talks about freedom – that most hallowed of American ideals – all the time. It’s in the Hebrew Scriptures. Remember the story of the Exodus when Moses led the Hebrews out of captivity in Egypt to freedom? This story is the central story of the Old Testament, the foundational story of Judaism itself. Freedom to worship their God as they chose in their own land is the message at its core. Of course, how that all unfolded is problematic to say the least but, still, freedom is the core value, the ultimate goal of all God’s people.

Freedom is also integral to the Christian Scriptures. Jesus didn’t really talk about freedom per se, but his entirely new way for people to be in relationship with God required them to be free from the confines of the formulaic practice of Judaism in the Temple. Freedom was integral to the experience of following Jesus because it was always, and still is, a very personal choice one must make for oneself. Each of

us must make that individual decision to follow Jesus but it is always made from the vantage point of freedom. We are free to follow Jesus and pick up all the responsibilities that come along with that decision. We are free to make that decision and then fall away from it. And, finally, we are always free to make the decision NOT to follow Jesus. What we cannot do is follow a Jesus of our own creation, a Jesus who embodies all of our personal needs. Dear ones, if the Jesus we worship looks and acts exactly it is not Jesus.

Freedom is indeed integral to our practice of our Christian faith here in this church. It always has been and it always will be. This is what the Establishment Clause is intended to enshrine. It is NOT a stop sign to be used against people who believe differently than you do. The individual's right to a personal faith belief and life based on that belief begins and ends with that person. Ironic that the individual exceptionalism now at the core of the Far Right agenda seeks to expand the individual's right to infringe on that same right for others who believe differently. An example might be helpful here. During the Covid Pandemic, resistance to masks and vaccines often claimed to be based in religious belief along the lines of "I believe God will keep me safe from this disease and therefore I should not be forced to wear a mask or take a vaccine. If I get sick and die, that is my risk to take in order to practice my faith as I choose." The only problem here is, as we sadly experienced firsthand, this person's religious belief about masks and vaccines did and still does put others in direct and imminent danger from a wildly erratic virus. Once again the issue became – My personal right to be me as I define it is more important than you who could be harmed by my decision. It's like saying it's okay to yell fire in a crowded theatre just because I think it would make me feel good to do it. It makes no sense. There is no room in this world view for the common good. As Osterheldt says, we have become an "us" made up entirely of individuals.

This issue is exactly what Paul was writing about in his letter to the Galatians, a small portion of which we read this morning. His words on freedom are so pertinent to our reality these days. He says, “for you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” (v. 13). Instead, he explains, make love for all the centerpiece of your freedom. How? He reminds us then of Jesus’ own words in the great commandment: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (v. 14). Love your neighbor as yourself. Dear ones, this is not new information to we who follow Jesus. We know this is what Jesus expects of us and we know that it is impossible to do if we always put our individual wants and desires ahead of everything, and everyone, else. Exceptional, radical individualism and the Beloved Community of God’s people are antithetical to each other. They cannot co-exist. We are called to care for each other, to do what’s right for everyone and not just for ourselves alone. Jesus expects this of us. Even more importantly, Jesus knows we are capable of doing it, of holding the needs of others in careful tension with our own.

So, what then are we to do in this moment, a moment that feels more than a little fraught with worry and anxiety that we are sliding toward some weird form of Christian authoritarianism. First and foremost, vote. Get registered. Get educated about the candidates and the issues at every level – local, state and national – and vote! Vote *your* mind and heart as an open minded and educated voter. Our freedom to vote is the bedrock of our democracy. Don’t take it for granted and don’t let other people make decisions for you that you will have to live with. Second, find the courage to speak up when you are confronted by misinformation or untruths. They both multiply exponentially when left unchallenged. Doing this takes courage, I know. But really, all you need to say is something like, “I’m not sure that’s true so let’s find something else to talk about.” You might be

surprised at how quickly folks are willing to change the topic! Finally, remember to pray. Pray every day for our country, for her leaders and for ourselves as her citizens. Give thanks to God that we live here in the world's first constitutional democracy even though she's a bit battered at the moment. And remember always to pray for yourself, that you will have the strength, the wisdom and the courage to be who Jesus needs you to be each day.

I'd like to end this morning with a beautiful piece which I discovered on Facebook this week. It was written by The Right Reverend Steven Charleston, a Bishop in the Episcopal Church. It is a sort of Beatitudes for these times and it says better than I ever could how we should live our faith in these troubled times.

“Blessed are those who feel the anger, but channel it into the creative energy of change.

Blessed are the frustrated, for their determination drives the cause of justice.

Blessed are the forgiving, for they keep the bridges between us from collapse.

Blessed are the listeners, for they are our last hope.

Blessed are the dreamers, for they show us the future is still possible.

Blessed are the open-minded, for they show us the diversity of heaven.

Blessed are the faithful, for they are our memory.

Blessed are those willing to risk love, for without them our vision would reach no farther than our politics.”

Yes. Just yes. Amen.