

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, July 4, 2010.*

Proper 9 Year C, Galatians 6:7-16, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Hear these words from what some might call the “Gospel according to Thomas Jefferson.” “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.” These words from the Declaration of Independence are truly “good news,” but technically speaking, the church calendar observes Independence Day tomorrow. Since July 4 falls on a Sunday this year, the weekly feast of our Lord's resurrection takes precedence. This is perhaps a good reminder to us that although our nation declared independence from England in 1776, we will never be independent from our Creator who endows us with everything. The Lord's Day is truly our independence day; which leads me to ask this question: “What would Jesus say about the Declaration of Independence?” Considering today's gospel reading from Luke, I think he might say that he already gave us a powerful statement of freedom: “The Kingdom of God has come near.”

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus appoints 70 followers to actually go ahead of him to the towns he will visit on his way to Jerusalem. They are to proclaim this message: “The Kingdom of God has come near.” This sounds at first like the political candidate who sends his campaign staff to town ahead of time to rally the crowds. Only Jesus is not interested in winning a vote. I wonder if these messengers are more like Paul Revere on his midnight ride, “The British are coming! The British are coming!” The Kingdom of God has come near! Only instead of an invading empire, they announce an invasion of peace and healing, but an invasion that will nonetheless cause a revolution.

The revolution which birthed this nation opened a new chapter in western civilization, a chapter in which individual rights and freedoms were valued alongside the power of governments to keep order and peace. The divine right of kings was usurped by the divine right of individuals to choose their rulers and control their governance. The danger of any freedom, of course, is that we may choose things that are not good for us. God created us to be free, but we have used our freedom time and again to hurt each other and to seek ways other than God's. We have even used our freedom to enslave ourselves to other masters. In our so called “free country” we are not really free. We serve and are dependent upon systems and institutions which claim to serve us but which often disappoint us. Financial institutions, health care institutions, energy institutions, government, even religious institutions. We toil and labor for the benefit of these structures which seem to provide order and prosperity and yet are so often corrupted by human failings. We are proud of the freedoms which our country has worked so hard to spread these 234 years, and yet we are still in bondage. We are bound by wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are bound by our difficulty in welcoming persons who want to cross our borders. We are bound by the tyranny of our increasing need for energy, energy that is costing us the very health of our planet.

But God does not leave us to suffer in our self-imposed bondage. From the beginning, God sent messengers to remind us that God is a much more merciful and just master than any of the ones we create. God even sent Jesus Christ to live as one of us, to suffer under the injustice of human masters, to show us that we could really be free if we want to, even free from fear of death. But freedom in the kingdom of God requires sacrifice. The cross. Those who want to gain their lives will lose them, Jesus says. When Jesus sends out his followers, he sends them out without purse, bag, money, or even footwear. By taking nothing, they are free to receive what others have to give. They are less encumbered and therefore free to truly greet others with a word of peace and to deliver the message: the kingdom of God has come near.

Recently, I traveled with a group of our youth to Belize on a pilgrimage. You'll be hearing more about that journey later in the summer, but for now I just want to share one reflection. I packed light and was really proud of myself that I could fit all my stuff into a bag that I could carry on the

airplane. But let me tell you, I never let that bag out of my sight. I made sure that my bag was safe and secure, that no one would take what was in it. When we arrived in Belize, I was a little nervous handing my bag over to a porter I had never met before to put it on a water taxi. I viewed the porter with just the slightest bit of suspicion. Was I free to really greet that porter? Was I free to see him as a fellow human being? Truly, I was not. I could not fully appreciate him as a beloved child of God, because there was a part of me worried that he was going to take what I believed to be mine. How ironic: a Christian priest, a so-called pilgrim on a holy journey, I was enslaved to my own selfish sense of security. It was humbling. I realized that I was on the journey not because I was able to proclaim any message about God's kingdom, but because I needed to have that message taught to me by those who were less encumbered, who were freer than I am.

The kingdom of God has come near. This is Jesus' declaration of independence. We do not have to serve the kings of this world, the empires that promise security and prosperity but often deliver fear and an unsatisfying quest for treasure. We can be free. There is a kingdom in which merciful, almighty God is the ruler, and it is within our reach. It is close at hand, scripture says. This kingdom is different from other kingdoms. In God's kingdom, the idea is not to establish borders but to erase them, to cross the lines that divide us, to speak a word of Peace, to share table fellowship with strangers. In God's kingdom, the governed seek not security but vulnerability. Jesus told his missionaries to eat whatever was set before them. That takes vulnerability. The citizens of God's kingdom seek out the weak and the sick and those in need. We find our freedom when we, in our weakness, feel God's strength and power to heal.

The good news is that we who have given our lives to Christ are enrolled as citizens in God's kingdom. We can rejoice that our names are written in heaven. But many of us are living as ex-patriots. We've lost our passports somewhere and have forgotten the way home. We insist that we can depend on ourselves. My brothers and sisters, the time has come to re-declare our independence from the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God is still at hand.

Of course, practically speaking, we will retain our national citizenships. We will depend somewhat on earthly masters. But we need not give them all our loyalty. Jesus told his missionaries to shake the dust from their feet in protest when they were not welcomed. There are places in this world where God's peace is not welcomed, places where hospitality to the poor and the stranger are withheld, places where people would rather see sickness than healing. Many of us know such places. Some of us even stand in those places, do business with those places. We are called to protest, to shake the dust from our feet and say, "I won't carry any of that with me!" But often we see the injustice and the tyranny and we say, "what can I do?" or we say, "I can't do anything, because I am dependent on the system. We do not feel free to shake the dust off our feet, because our feet are covered in mud. How do we walk away?"

It must have been very hard for those signers of the Declaration of Independence to walk away from mother England. But at some point, the tyranny was too much to bear and they declared their freedom, and many have paid for that freedom with their lives. Jesus is calling us to an even greater declaration of independence, one that will be more difficult and costly, but one that will ultimately give us life, healing, power, and peace. We have an identity greater than any country or clan, for we are the children and subjects of our Lord. With our Lord's help we can shake the dust of injustice, perhaps only a speck at a time, from the soles of our feet, for the souls of our hearts belong to Christ. Christ declares our independence: the Kingdom of God has come near. In support of that declaration, we can apply those closing words of Thomas Jefferson, "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other [and I would add "to our God"] our lives, our fortunes, and our Sacred honor."