

“Freedom”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
Independence Day – 30 June & 1 July  
Matthew 5:43-49

Isn’t it a blessing to be free of tyranny, to live in a land where law, not the whim of a ruler, governs us? Isn’t a blessing to know that God inspired our founders to enshrine within the Constitution the right for us to exercise our faith freely – not only in worship, but in all that we do as a community and as individuals to advance the Kingdom of God, to serve God’s purpose of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ?

So anticipating July 4<sup>th</sup>, we celebrate and honor our ancestors this weekend, thankful for the legacy they’ve given us, a legacy hard-won often at great cost, a legacy we neglect at our peril. Yet even more we are grateful for our God, who works through democracy to liberate us from oppression, but who also frees us from the tyranny of sin and death, an infinitely greater threat. For without that blessing of graceful reconciliation, that blessing of spiritual healing, all of the others don’t really matter.

Without forgiveness of sin, we have no hope for the future, which makes prayer pointless. Without hope, how can we have faith? Without faith, our love is fickle, limited, and weak. Without godly love, we can have no peace, and without peace, we have no joy, only bleak chaos: vicious, brutal, unforgiving, hateful, and increasingly violent in both word and deed.

But we do have these blessings in abundance, thanks to God, if we choose to receive them and exercise them: forgiveness, hope, the power of prayer; faith, godly love; peace, and joy. By accepting such awesome grace with humble gratitude, we serve as witnesses to a freedom far greater than the world could ever give, and Lord knows that witness is needed greatly, for we live in a world marred by intense enmity, by manufactured divisions designed to

manipulate, by the perverse pleasure some take in being mean and cruel, in de-humanizing others and demonizing those who are different. And if history has taught anything, it is this. When cruelty prevails, freedom dies.

In this environment, it is terribly tempting to give as good as we get, to exchange insult for insult, to entertain far-from-charitable thoughts toward our neighbors. We fear that acting in love and peace rather than in hatred and anger will make us seem weak, that our cause will be lost. This fear is rooted in forgetfulness. Hear the words of Jesus. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” [Matthew 5:5 & 9] That sounds ridiculous only to a heart devoid of faith, for we know that Jesus, in his resurrection, has made what the world sees as ridiculous into a reality.

Yet an equally dangerous temptation is to take these words about the meek and the peacemaker as an excuse for inaction, a justification for withdrawing from the public sphere, hiding in safety behind a veil of silence. To do so forsakes our responsibility to act as witnesses to a faith that can heal, a faith that brings justice and mercy, a faith with the power to renew and transform. Being a child of God means taking risks and, sometimes, getting hurt, because to be children of God, we must take up our cross and follow Jesus.

For as he said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” That’s everybody’s favorite Bible verse. The conditional nature of that statement is clear. To be children of God, we must love and pray for our enemies, and if we do not, then we cannot become children of God and heirs to the promise of everlasting life. A child of God loves the enemy. I cannot think of a heavier or harder cross to bear, and none of us can bear it alone. But together, with Jesus by our side, we can.

Hanging on the cross, surrounded by enemies mocking him, “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.’” [Luke 23:34] These were the people who plagued Jesus throughout his ministry, who strove to discredit and embarrass him, who engineered his execution. And he resisted them, sometimes with very firm language, but mostly, he responded to their accusations and unfair criticisms by performing miracles of healing. Jesus countered their lies and meanness with miracles of healing. I love that.

Now his words of forgiveness did not change their behavior. They kept on jeering Jesus. In fact, there’s no evidence that Jesus’ forgiveness ever changed their attitudes or actions. But there was an immediate effect. They were forgiven. Even if they didn’t notice it, even if they didn’t want it or think they needed it, they were forgiven. That is real power, the power of God’s love flowing through the forgiver, freeing the forgiver from the resentment that consumes the soul. Forgiveness is the only true and abiding freedom.

Indeed, we need to forgive just as much as we need to be forgiven. In the Lord’s Prayer, we say, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” To forgive and be forgiven are inseparable. A person that won’t forgive, or at least try to, cannot receive forgiveness. A person who won’t to at least try to forgive is someone who thinks they’re superior, and a person who thinks they’re superior doesn’t think they need forgiveness. And the reverse is true, too. To forgive, we need to accept forgiveness, even when it comes from our enemy, perhaps especially when it comes from our enemy.

Of course, some of you might be thinking, “Well, I don’t have any enemies.” Others think, “When I love my enemies, they are no longer my enemies, because I love them.” But that’s not how it worked on Golgotha. Jesus loved and forgave his enemies, but they didn’t stop being his enemies. They keep on insulting him from the foot of the cross, opposed everything he

stood for, and were probably quite pleased with themselves as they watched him suffer and die. The Oxford American College Dictionary defines an enemy as “a person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone or something,” “a thing that harms or weakens something else.” You’re a Christian. You’ve made a commitment to change a world that plenty of people like fine just the way it is. You’ve got enemies.

So where do we get started? In his Letter to the Christians in Rome, a church facing a lot of suspicion, hostility, and enmity, Paul had a few ideas. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry; feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” [12:17-21]

In other words, be kind to those who are mean to you. Reject fantasies of vengeance and don’t scheme to achieve it. That’s God’s job. Being kind to the cruel may cause them to feel pangs of conscience and regret – Paul’s “burning coals” – that might lead to repentance and reconciliation. But even if it doesn’t, doing the noble thing makes you stronger, wiser, more self-confident and secure – even if your enemy sees it as weakness. If I be strong, may I be strong in the Lord, and if somebody thinks that’s weak, that’s their problem.

Forgiven and forgiving, there’s hope for the future, and with hope, we can pray with integrity, and that helps grow our faith. With faith, God’s overpowering love flows into us and out from us to God and others. Full of love, we find peace in the presence of the God Who IS love, and peace gives us freedom, and freedom brings us joy.

This process takes patience. We're not always going to be feeling the peace and joy when somebody's being ugly to us, trolling us on social media, or spreading rumors and gossip. If you want immediate gratification, get angry and lash out, but be aware that seeking the quick fix of self-righteousness fury is addictive. The more you do it, the more you'll need it, until it controls your life entirely, and then you're a prisoner of hatred, completely unfree.

But if you're interested in something infinitely better, take a deep breath, pray your pants off, and abide in Jesus as best you can. In the midst of your pain, you are being forged in the crucible of God, purified to be an ever better witness to love and forgiveness, taking steps on the Way that leads to everlasting life. And you will be free, truly free in the way God wants you to be, liberated from the tyranny of sin and death. Amen.