

Sunday after Independence Day – 2020

Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage. Galatians 5:1

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....

American independence began with an act of free speech -- the Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4th, 1776 – and its appeal to the authority of the Creator, over against the authority of any particular human government. So it is no surprise that the First Amendment to the Constitution, in the Bill of Rights, is to uphold both freedom of religion from state interference, and freedom of speech

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.

Today, perhaps, we would not appeal to the authority of God for our freedom. The tendency in our culture is simply to assert the right to freedom as somehow self-evident. It is something that is simply “there”, a kind of “given”, a reality that has no cause, no foundation, no reason to exist. This is indeed nonsense. It is a given because it is a gift: and it is a right, because it is established by the authority of the Creator, and thus answers to our nature as rational creatures, made in the image of God. In that appeal to the authority of the Creator, can we alone claim our liberty. It is only by appeal to the superior authority of God, that we are set free from the absolute claim of any other authority, set free indeed to question it, to criticize it, to challenge it, to protest it, to abjure it. Religion is the acknowledgement of the Creator’s authority: without it, all other freedoms are in

question. It belongs therefore to a free people desiring to preserve their freedom, that they be diligent to maintain and set forward *true religion and virtue*.

The appeal to God's authority is the exercise of freedom of speech, a freedom which is grounded in the gospel itself. "The Church created by the act of God at Pentecost was characterized by freedom of address – to God in its prayer, and from God in its prophecy". (O; Donovan) *Parrhesia*, or "Boldness of speech", describes the New Testament approach of the church to God and to the world, claiming and proclaiming the freedom of our creation and redemption in Christ, for the new community in which all share in this freedom. And because, as Joel said, that Spirit is poured out on *all flesh*, it is not reserved to a privileged ruling elite: *your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit* (Joel 2:28, 29). "Any voice addressing the community about the common good had to be heard, lest the voice of true prophecy go unheard" (O Donovan p. 269).

The Scriptures speak of course about the Christian Church, not the post-Christian, secular state: yet they indicate the source and origin of our regard for the freedom of speech, embedded in the Constitution of these United States. It is surely incumbent upon us as Christians, that we preserve this freedom of speech. We might cherish and adopt for ourselves the celebrated maxim attributed (incorrectly) to the atheist Voltaire, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". But to cite that once-celebrated quotation is to expose how quickly we are moving away from it. For all the barrage of words that pours out of our phones, computers, televisions, radios, newspapers, magazines and books, freedom of speech is now a wasting asset in the leading institutions of our society. In a host of elite institutions "cancel culture" is on the ascendant: shutting down opinions of which we disapprove, and "deplatforming" those whose views we do not share. The leaders of elite institutions once stood up for freedom of speech: now

they are leading the way into self-censorship, capitulating to the demands of people who demand free speech for themselves, but not for others. The latest case was of the Boeing executive, who “voluntarily” stepped down, because of a piece he wrote 33 years ago, opposing women in the military – a view which he does not now maintain. Regardless of what you think of this issue, this is a shameful craven capitulation by a major corporation whose top priority apparently is avoiding some bad PR. Sadly, the examples could be multiplied – in elite institutions of education, entertainment, business, media, and even social media. It’s not just highflying executives, either, with financial safety nets – it’s people living paycheck to paycheck, who run afoul of the Twitter mob. Westerners who have been paying attention are appalled by the draconian new Security Law imposed on Hong-Kong, which criminalizes political dissent, and has dissidents scrambling to purge their old social media posts of any hint of criticism of the Chinese dictatorship. Yet under the tyranny of Twitter-mobs, a similar self-censorship is happening here in the USA.

Back in the 1950’s Senator Joe McCarthy used the House UnAmerican Activities Committee to foment the persecution of many law-abiding Americans in the early 1950s’, and brought the legitimate cause of anti-communism into discredit. Among those who criticized his reckless bullying was Senator Margaret Chase Smith, a Maine Republican. In a speech to the Senate in 1950 she called for an end to "character assassinations" and named "some of the basic principles of Americanism: The right to criticize; The right to hold unpopular beliefs; The right to protest; The right of independent thought". In the same year, President Harry S. Truman wrote "In a free country, we punish men for the crimes they commit, but never for the opinions they have.”

Do not the words of Senator Smith and President Truman resound today? Because that is precisely what has happened in our country. We are now punishing Americans for the opinions they have. Both of these were voices from the heights of

American life challenging the assault on freedom. Who are the leaders today, who will speak up with the same clarity and courage? This is not a partisan issue, but one in which every American has the same deep interest, regardless of their point of view on any issue we face. This belongs to the very substance of our freedom as a nation. At a time when many Americans are deeply concerned about policing, justice, racism, disease and economic depression, it is the power to challenge, to criticize, to protest that opens the door to positive change. In that self-correcting power of free speech that is the power to make change for the better. As Jefferson said, “reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error”. When we shut down the right to free speech, we shut the door to positive change. When we shut it down in others for the sake of the cause we espouse, we are undermining the very cause we champion. Hear also Benjamin Franklin: “in those wretched countries where a man cannot call his tongue his own, he can scarce call anything his own. Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freeness of speech; a thing terrible to public traitors” [Dogwood Papers]

Let’s cherish that freedom of speech, by exercising it with courage but also civility; with reason and not just passion; by refusing to take part in the cancel culture, by giving our vocal support to those leaders in public and private life who stand against it. Let’s cherish the right to freedom of speech, by upholding the right of those with unpopular beliefs, to that same speech. And let us exercise our own freedom of speech, and our freedom of religion, in the prayers for our country which we are bold to say, *in the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free.*

For Our Country.

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage; We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favour and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honourable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogancy, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one

united people the multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

O God, whose Name is excellent in all the earth, and thy glory above the heavens, who as on this day didst inspire and direct the hearts of our delegates in Congress, to lay the perpetual foundations of peace, liberty, and safety; we bless and adore thy glorious Majesty, for this thy loving kindness and providence. And we humbly pray that the devout sense of this signal mercy may renew and increase in us a spirit of love and thankfulness to thee its only author, a spirit of peaceable submission to the laws and government of our country, and a spirit of fervent zeal for our holy religion, which thou hast preserved and secured to us and our posterity. May we improve these inestimable blessing for the advancement of religion, liberty, and science throughout this land, till the wilderness and solitary place be glad through us, and the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose. This we beg through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour. *Amen.*

¶ *The Collect: to be used instead of that for the Day.*

ALmighty God, who hast in all ages shewed forth thy power and mercy in the wonderful preservation of thy church, and in the protection of every nation and people professing thy holy and eternal Truth, and putting their sure trust in thee; We yield thee our unfeigned thanks and praise for all thy public mercies, and more especially for that signal and wonderful manifestation of thy providence which we commemorate this day; Wherefore not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy Name be ascribed all honor and glory, in all churches of the Saints, from generation to generation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

