

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Freedom and Generosity”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Ordinary 13 --July 1, 2018

Lessons: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

I have heard it often said that many of us in this country take our freedom for granted. With that in mind, I want to share with you something Paul Harvey, the radio host wrote on July 4, 1974. “I don't know what impression you'd had of these men who met that hot summer in Philadelphia, but I think it's important this July 4, that we remember this about them: they were not poor men, they were not wild-eyed pirates; these were men of means, these were rich men, most of them, who enjoyed much ease and luxury in personal living. Not hungry men, prosperous men, wealthy land owners, substantially secure in their prosperity.

“But they considered liberty – this is as much I shall say of it – they had learned that liberty is so much more important than security, that they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. And they fulfilled their pledge – they paid the price, and freedom was born.”<sup>1</sup> Most of us don't remember all the words of The Declaration, but among the most important are the final words: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

They gave us, in written form, the American dream, a dream that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Now, we all know that the American dream is also a bit idealistic and, more importantly, some of it has not been true for all our citizens. Dr. King once said: “Ever since the Founding Fathers...dreamed this noble dream, America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand we have proudly professed the principles of democracy, and on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles.” When our Constitution was written and signed, people from Africa had no votes, no legal rights, and for political purposes were counted as three fifths of a person. Women may have counted as whole persons, but they had no more legal rights. Some will know the feeling of Frederick Douglass, who, in his 1852 July Fourth Oration, suggested that the Fourth of July, more than all the other days in the year, is simply a day that reveals to the American slave the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.<sup>3</sup> We celebrate freedom, but we do so today, recognizing that there are some who still are not yet free. We celebrate a work that is in progress, not a work that is completed. As we celebrate, we are also challenged to join those brave signers, pledging our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor to bring this dream into a greater reality.

Not surprisingly, the dream has its foundations within the community of faith, which is not to say that ours is a Christian or a Judeo-Christian country. It is more than that. One of the great strengths of the dream is that liberty extends beyond the Christian community, beyond all faith communities, recognizing that liberty is a gift from God, given to all humanity. What I find absolutely extraordinary about the signers of our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution is that even as they ignored the rights of women and slaves, still they proclaimed the dream of liberty for all. It is a dream for people like the woman who went to Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Harvey, What Happened to the Signers of the Declaration. July 4, 1974

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. The American Dream, sermon preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, July 4, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro. A Speech given at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852.

for healing. An outcast who had been ignored for years, Jesus recognized her humanity. He took the time actually to see her, to listen to her, to speak with her. Liberty extends to such as these. For us today, who are the people like that woman? Who are the forgotten and ostracized today? How might we bring the dream of liberty into reality for them? That surely is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ and as citizens of this great land.

I want also to suggest that there is an economic aspect to freedom. In our lesson today, Paul encouraged the Corinthian Church to give in support of the church in Jerusalem. He challenged them to be generous as God had been generous to them. He called for a fair balance between the abundance of the Corinthians and the need in Jerusalem. Even way back then it was difficult to persuade some folks out in the country to support the needs of the city. Paul's hope was that "the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." That is a word for us today. In a time of extraordinary prosperity, too many of our children are hungry, too many of our people are living in poverty, too many people have not yet discovered the American dream because of economic inequalities. What might we do to bring this dream into a greater reality for all our people?

More than sixty years ago, Harry Emerson Fosdick suggested that if we are to save our democracy, we must have a shift of emphasis, "from a too great content with the motive of private profit, to a more inclusive care for the economic well-being of the whole community. How terribly our financial inequalities split us up into antagonistic groups! Sometimes I think it sheer hypocrisy on Sunday morning to repeat the Lord's prayer here—'Our daily bread.' Every significant economic movement in the world today is dealing, one way or another, with this problem—how to escape the old, out-dated, too-individualistic, *laissez faire* economy, every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost, which splits us up into angry groups—how to find a way to meet our common needs together.... Our democracy will never be safe until it is economic as well as political, until our daily business draws us together around common interests instead of splitting us apart, until all the people can really pray: 'Our daily bread.'"<sup>4</sup> The American dream, which we celebrate this week, includes liberty on an economic level.

Here in church, I find that I am always grateful for the generations who have gone before us. You know some of them and they are not far away. I believe they join with us still when we worship together. There are so many things that make them special and one of them was their generosity. Go back a couple of generations and I suspect that we'd find that people gave a far greater percentage of their resources in God's service in the world. They join with Paul in challenging us to ask how we might better use our resources to ensure the liberty of all people. How might we pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor in support of all our sisters and brothers throughout this land?

The liberty we celebrate is a gift from God and it is a work in progress. Let me conclude with words written by Judge Learned Hand in 1944 at an event welcoming new citizens into our nation:

"We have gathered here to affirm a faith, a faith in a common purpose, a common conviction, a common devotion. Some of us have chosen America as the land of our adoption; the rest have come from those who did the same. For this reason we have some right to consider ourselves a picked group, a group of those who had the courage to break from the past and brave the dangers and the loneliness of a strange land. What was the object that nerved us, or those who went before us, to this choice? We sought liberty - freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be ourselves. This then we sought; this we now believe that we are by way of winning. What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Mankind's Deep Need—the Sense of Community*, in *Riverside Sermons*. Harper and Brothers © 1958.

it lies there, it needs no constitution, no law, no court to save it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few - as we have learned to our sorrow. What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interest alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten - that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side-by-side with the greatest.”<sup>5</sup>

The freedom we celebrate today is a work in progress. Like those of long ago, we are invited to pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor that this land might yet be what it ought to be, what it was founded to be, what it is called to be, a land where everyone is free.

Let us pray: Most gracious God, we give you thanks for this land in which we live. We give you thanks for the dream of freedom that lives in our hearts. Empower us that we might carry the dream forward and make it a greater reality for all God’s people. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Billings Learned Hand, Speech given at *I Am an American Day* gathering. May 21, 1944. Central Park, New York, NY, in *The Spirit of Liberty, Papers and Addresses of Learned Hand*. Alfred A. Knoff © 1952