

“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.”

Most of us know these words from our Declaration of Independence. They are a good reminder that there was a time when a group of men could come together to craft a vision that was radical and new and by some miracle, make it work. They organized to resist oppression and not only did they lead a successful revolution they managed to craft a new way of governing and bringing together men who were willing to risk both life and property for what they believed. Granted they were all men, they were all white, and they had been educated according to the principles of Western thinking but their perspective is remarkably expansive and has proven to be adaptable. The first verse of our sequence hymn honors the risks they took.

*Once to ev'ry man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision,
Off'ring each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
'Twi'x't that darkness and that light. (James Russell Lowell)*

Their decision to support revolution was based on the values that they espoused: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But what does life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness really mean? Certainly these words take on a deeper meaning when we look at them through the lens of our faith tradition. And just as an aside, the use of the word “Creator” is not a reference to entirely “Christian” understanding of God – but that is another story.

Life as an inalienable right meant the physical act of being, of not being deprived of life unjustly or without due process. Life is a bit more complicated for the author of Wisdom who reminds us that death was not the desired end for human beings. Life is good, righteous life gives us access to immortality. As Christians life takes on an added dimension. We are to live life in the knowledge and the love of God, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans (6.23) “...the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Eternal life is not a phase 2 of our life on earth but a life lived in transformation, of being conformed to Christ with the hope of the resurrection in life after death. Already there the potential for tension between the autonomy of our lives as individuals and what it means to have life in Christ. Jesus himself laid out the ultimate paradox and since this is recorded one way or another in all four gospels* it is of paramount importance. Here I quote from the Gospel of Mark (8:35) “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” While God’s gift of life is good, we are to hold it loosely when we turn it over to Christ.

While the meaning of liberty comes with constraints on both the part of the Declaration of Independence and our Christian tradition, since neither promotes anarchy, liberty as a citizen usually means freedom as defined in our Bill of Rights, mostly about liberty from interference

by the government. Christian freedom on the other hand, well Christian freedom is a bit different. In his letter to the Galatians (5:13-14) Paul writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's the paradox of freedom in Christ, it's not just about us, it's not just about our families, or friends, or people who look and speak like us. Freedom is an opportunity to move beyond our personal interest knowing that in doing so we are wrapped in the protective embrace of God's desire for us to live into God's image. Freedom in Christ can be just as risky if not riskier than giving one's all to found a new country!

And then there's happiness. In the eyes of our Founding Fathers happiness was not a state of mind but rather the capacity to pursue well-being for oneself and for others, which might come as a shock to those intent only on pursuing their self-interest today. As Christians we frequently hear about happiness in our psalms. In at least 20 of our psalms** happiness accrues to those who seek a right relationship with God. The psalms tell us not to follow the path of sinners but to delight in the law of the Lord, to follow his decrees. Those who follow the Lord can take refuge in him, they can trust in God's strength. God also looks favorably on those who consider the poor, who observe justice, and do righteousness. This is not a vision of being care-free but of living a life with purpose and a place in God's order.

Our passage from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians addresses our need to look out for the welfare and happiness of others. He is urging the Corinthians to contribute to the relief of the churches in Jerusalem where there was a severe famine, "it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need". Corinth is a long way from Jerusalem; Paul was not asking the Corinthians to assist people they knew. Moreover these were Jewish Christians that Paul is asking his primarily gentile congregation to assist. This need to look out for those less fortunate is commanded by God and has been part of our tradition from the very beginning.

Furthermore this expectation that we are to provide assistance to those beyond our comfort zone is present in the two healing stories from this week's gospel. In and of themselves they are two wonderful stories. Jesus raises the young daughter of a leader in the synagogue from the dead, and he heals the woman who has been bleeding for we years. But these are far more than just stories of healing and it is how they are intertwined that provides even more understanding of what Jesus is doing in the kingdom of God. First they show that God has no partiality either for the rich or for the poor. Jairus is a respected leader in his community. His daughter has her own room which means he was also man of property. He humbles himself before Jesus but does not fear rejection. On the other hand, the woman, who has no name, has been ill for 12 years. She is impoverished by her illness and more than that she would have been considered unclean in her community so not only was she poor, she was an outcast. She does not dare approach Jesus directly she does not even try to touch him, but only his clothes.

Faith is the great equalizer and Jesus responds to both requests. The little girl is restored to life and the woman, not only is she healed but she can now take her place in the community

which means she too has been restored to life. Both of them have been given the chance to pursue happiness. And there is more. Our gospel is bigger than our declaration of independence for it is not just men who are created equal but women. Notice Jesus has been willing to bring two women back to fullness of life and he did not hesitate to violate the norms of ritual purity in the process. Jesus touches the girl who was dead – an act that would have rendered him ritually unclean and he engages and blesses this bleeding woman whose condition would have also made him unclean. God transcends boundaries that separate and diminish our humanity and God expects us to do the same.

At the altar we celebrate the greatest human victory of all – Jesus Christ’s triumph over sin and death and as baptized Christians we get to participate in that victory. So as you go forth to day, and as you celebrate the fourth on Wednesday, may you rejoice in your life in Christ, may you embrace your freedom in Christ, and may you pursue happiness as you delight in his will and walk in his ways.

Amen

*Matt 10:39, 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, John 12:25

** Psa1:1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; ² but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

Psa 1:1-2 Happy are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Psa 32:1-2 ³ O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Psa 34:8 ⁴ Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

Psalm 41:1 Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble. ² The LORD protects them and keeps them alive; they are called happy in the land.

Psa 41:1-2 ⁴ Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.

Psa 65:4 ⁴ Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. ⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

Psa 84:4-5 ² O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Psa 84:12 ¹⁵ Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;

Psa 89:15 ¹² Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law,

Psa 94:12 ³ Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

Psalm 112:1 Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments.

Psalm 119:1 Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. ² Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,

Psalm 128:1 Happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways. ² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.