

## With Liberty and Justice for All

II Corinthians 3:12-17

Well, we are officially into the summer season. If any of you were on the roads on this holiday weekend, you wonder whether anyone stayed home. Summer brings the opportunity for a different pace, perhaps some different activities, maybe more reading, going to the beach, camping...and of course time for picnics. We are having a family picnic this afternoon. I heard the story about a visiting minister who had been invited to the big outdoor gathering at a country church and had been asked to preach after the picnic barbeque. One of the ladies of the church offered to fill his plate for him, but he immediately stopped her. "I never eat before I preach. I find that it keeps me from preaching a really good sermon." After the service, a friend asked the same lady what she thought of the sermon. Her comment was: "As far as I'm concerned, he might as well have eaten."

Well at least I'm preaching before the picnic this morning. This weekend is Fourth of July weekend, sometimes referred to as Liberty weekend. As a nation we celebrate our independence, but more importantly we celebrate the concept of freedom and liberty. We say that the idea of holding on to our personal freedoms is important. The freedom to assemble, the freedom to express our opinions and ideas, the freedom to worship. Freedoms that we cherish and we know should never be taken for granted. We are grateful to our servicemen and women who have served to protect that freedom. Liberty, freedom... It is part of the fabric and makeup of our nation. We say it in our pledge of allegiance...one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

The Pledge of Allegiance is not a verse composed by the Founding Fathers of our republic. It was written especially for children in the summer of 1892 to commemorate that year's celebration of Columbus Day in public schools through out the country.

The pledge first appeared in print on September 8, 1892, in *The Youth's Companion*, an educational publication. In its original form, it read: "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands -- one nation indivisible-- with liberty and justice for all."

Its author was Francis Bellamy, an assistant editor of *The Youth's*

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*Companion*, who intended it for a one-time recitation. But its immediate popularity transformed it first into an annual Columbus Day tradition and then into a daily classroom ritual. It became one of the earliest verses memorized by students. Since its debut, Bellamy's pledge has undergone two major alterations. In 1923, the National Flag Conference of the American Legion replaced the somewhat ambiguously personal "my Flag" wording with the more explicitly patriotic "the Flag of the United States of America." And in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a bill that added the words "Under God."

With liberty and justice for all...it is part of what we stand for, it is a principle we believe in. Yet we know in practical terms, the reality of how we live, and the way people are sometimes treated falls short of that principle.

How many times in recent days have the attitudes of racism and the questions about how people have been treated cause us to step back and ask ourselves how are we living this concept of liberty and justice for all. The terrible tragedy in Charleston, SC, brought to the forefront the need for much more conversation and understanding about racial prejudice and the call to value every life as a child of God. Our hearts continue to go out to all the families of those who suffer from that tragic event and our prayers continue for the Emanuel AME church.

The pursuit of liberty and justice for all is more than an American dream. It represents a Biblical objective and mandate for all people. Inscribed on the Liberty Bell near Independence Hall are these words: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof..." These words are from Leviticus 25:10. They are words that describe Israel's year of Jubilee. You see every 50<sup>th</sup> year each person was to return to his own inheritance and his own family, regardless of any transfers of property or any enforced slavery that may have transpired. It was like a whole new beginning. A time of liberation and freedom. It was a God-given benefit based upon obedience to God's laws.

You hear very clearly God's intent for his people. Verse 17: "Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your

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God.” There is this definite connection between liberty and justice. If we are going to have real freedom then we have to learn how to practice justice. It was the theme of our youth weekend two weeks ago...from Micah 6:8 What does the Lord require of you? Three things: To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. God calls us to champion the causes of justice. To speak for the concerns of the oppressed and victimized. To comfort those who are distressed and troubled. To bring support and help to the poor and those in need. This is our calling. This is our mandate. And when we look at the world around us, we know that these principles and actions are often ignored or distorted.

The prophet Micah offers these words and challenges his hearers. The words of a prophet are usually difficult for us to hear, and yet they become messengers of God to stir us from complacency to action. In his book, What is Anglicanism, Urban T. Holmes speaks of this message like this:

“There is no doubt that the biblical concept of the Kingdom calls for a ministry to the suffering, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the hungry and whomever is dehumanized by an unjust society. In abstract, almost all of us can affirm this with enthusiasm. When it is the vocation, however, of one of our number to make this Gospel imperative, a matter demanding and requiring us to change our comfortable ways, then many of us fall away. The prophet has never been popular among his other contemporaries. He has been stoned, beheaded, crucified and shot. If not killed, we have been all too ready to vilify him or her in the name of God, little realizing that it may well be God who sent the prophet to challenge our complacency.”

With liberty and justice for all. We cannot walk humbly with our God if we are not being just with our neighbor. We cannot experience the blessings of freedom, if we harbor feelings of superiority, or hatred, or attitude of prejudice within our hearts. The dream of liberty is truly liberty and justice for all. The two go hand in hand.

Obviously a much more controversial issue has to do with the matters of human sexuality and one’s sexual orientation that has been at the forefront of our attention in recent days and as recent as last week’s Supreme Court decision. When you look at the Christian

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church as a whole, you discover that the church has many different and diverse views on this subject. As a church, I know we hold many different views and beliefs about how this is to be lived out, we may have strong convictions about our understanding, what are the principles of Scripture we are called to follow, and we will continue to have conversations on this topic, but one thing is certain, we are called to be a welcoming and caring community of faith. We are called to be in ministry with all persons. Our attitudes and outreach must be Christ-centered.

For followers of Jesus Christ, this way of life is directly connected to the freedom we have experienced because of our trust in God's amazing grace. We have been set free in Christ. This is the resounding conviction of the apostle Paul in today's reading in II Corinthians: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

To say in the Lord, there is freedom, means that there was a prior condition where we were not free, we were in a condition of bondage. And so it is for every person. We are enslaved by our sin, but God is in the business of liberating. Paul says, it's like having the veil taken away. "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord...are being transformed into the same image from the one degree of glory to another."

This is our new position, this is our new life...And it is a life that now sees things differently. We see people around us differently. We learn to see people with the eyes of Christ. Notice I said learn...for the old nature within us can often re-surface, and so we have to learn to cultivate that Christlike spirit...as we grow in our Christian faith.

Maybe these words from Micah can serve as the barometer for how we are doing in living in the Spirit God calls us to live. We can each ask ourselves these questions:

1. To do justice...

How do I see and treat my neighbor? Do I harbor attitudes that cause a barrier between myself and other people. Do I treat all people with love and respect? Do I speak for those who are less

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- privileged or have little voice in society? Am I diligently seeking after justice and understanding for all of God's children?
2. To love kindness...  
Am I intentional in showing kindness and mercy to people? To I look for opportunities to "pay it forward" by my acts of mercy and caring? Do I live in the spirit of forgiveness and grace? Hey Young shared last week about the remarkable witnesses that came out of the horrific event at the Emanuel AME church, It was the response of persons whose family were the victims of the killing. They described their pain and deep hurt, but they also expressed words of forgiveness and mercy to the one who had done this terrible act. What a witness of persons who had been steeped in the love of God in Jesus Christ!
  3. And to walk humbly with your God. Walking humbly means recognizing we live not in our own strength, but we trust in the God who gives us life and makes us what we can be. And so the question we ask ourselves is: how am living in that Spirit, how am I trusting God for my needs, depending on God to show me how to live. I want to walk humbly with my God.

In 1986 our nation celebrated the Centennial Year of the Statue of Liberty. One of the most moving stories of that year was told by a winner of an essay contest on the subject of liberty. It was told by an 11 year old Vietnamese girl who shared the fear and oppression she and her family had experienced during the Vietnam war. She told how her family had escaped by getting on one of those small boats that had left her country and was finally picked up by a naval ship and eventually sailed into America into the New York Harbor. What a beautiful sight when she saw the Statue of Liberty. She shared her feelings of what it meant to be free, that she now had the opportunity for a new life. The words found on the Statue of Liberty offered her and thousands of others her invitation: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free!"

These are the words we celebrate as a nation, but these are also the words we are called to live by. It reminds us of Jesus' invitation: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That's an invitation we can receive, and it is also an invitation we can extend to others as we live for the causes of freedom and peace.

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Listen to how the apostle Paul describes our relationship with Christ in Galatians 5:13: “For you have been called to live in freedom, not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love.”

Bishop Wayne Miller of the Lutheran Church declared these words about justice:

“That though there may be many and various things that Christ has set you free FROM, for sure what Christ has set you free FOR is the freedom of others. Christ has set you free to set free those who are poor, those who hunger, those who weep, those who are despised...

Christ has set you free FOR ALL... free to live life with your hands held open, without restraint. Christ has set you free to release your own talent, your own imagination, your own abundance and to let it run wild in the world around you. Christ has set you free to share the story of your own journey from bondage to liberation with someone who desperately needs to hear it.

It is not an easy call to respond to, but it is a worthy vocation. Because the dream... that treasure in the kettle at the end of the great arc, sisters and brothers, is JUSTICE.”

We are challenged to look for ways to make a difference in our communities and world. As we reach out to our neighbors with love and compassion. As we work for understanding and justice among people. As we reach out to a hurting world with the love of Jesus. May the words of our pledge of allegiance become our challenge to live as Christ calls us to live...with liberty and justice for all.