

SET FREE FOR FREEDOM
Galatians 5:1, 13-16

In a few days we will celebrate the Fourth of July.

Of all the truly American holidays, like Memorial Day, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving, of all these American holidays, the Fourth of July is the most massive and some might argue the most important.

After all without the events of July 4, 1776 which gave rise to Independence Day, we would not be observing any of the other American holidays for there would be no America.

We will mark this significant holiday, with flags and bunting, parades and picnics, family gatherings and fireworks.

All this festivity and flag-waving and pyrotechnics are to remember and mark 242 years of independence, liberty, freedom.

The late Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes of Harvard University said, "There is more to the Fourth of July and the celebrating of citizenship than fetes and feasting and noise Citizens who take both their county and their faith seriously should [be encouraged to] think about the purpose of freedom" ("The Purpose of Freedom," in *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p.110).

For a few moments on the Sunday before the Fourth of July 2018, I want to take Dr. Gomes counsel and think together about FREEDOM.

Sometimes in our eagerness and enthusiasm, American imagines that freedom is a uniquely American idea.

We assume that freedom finds its origins or at least its expression in the minds and deeds of Adams and Jefferson, Washington and Henry, Franklin and Madison – the Founding Fathers.

We suppose that liberty's scriptures are our "founding documents" – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights.

We might presume that freedom's native land is America and that liberty is "made in America."

But the truth of the matter is that in the long history of freedom, American liberty is a Johnny-come-lately.

Three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson drafted our Declaration of Independence, when the Hebrew people were held as slaves in Egypt, God sent Moses with a simple declaration of liberty, "Let my people go."

A thousand years later and two thousand years before the hot summer of 1776, Jesus of Nazareth offered a declaration of independence.

He declared to the congregation at Nazareth that he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).

This Jesus told his followers, “If you continue in my word. . . you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free . . . so if the Son of God makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:32).

And after Jesus, Paul wrote to the Galatians about being “called for freedom,” about being “set free for freedom” (Galatians 5:13).

And to the Romans he wrote about the “glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

Indeed, the idea and reality of freedom, goes back even before Moses and Jesus and Paul,
it’s at the beginning;
it’s in the DNA of creation.

In a Fourth of July sermon, the Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams said, “Freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. In the beginning,” she continues, “God. . . . created us, women and men, with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the Living God” (“The Predicament of Freedom,” *Day 1*, July 1, 2007 at www.day1.org).

Freedom’s source is nothing less than God.

The freedom that we cherish finds its source not in this land nor in our history, but long before in the heart, mind, and will of God.

The independence which we celebrate on Independence Day,
the freedom for which so many have given the “last full measure
of devotion,”

the liberties that “we the people” so cherish and celebrate
are not uniquely American, but they are expressions of what Paul
calls “the glorious liberty” that finds its source in God.

“We the people” of America are trustees, stewards, of the
great treasure of freedom.

But, what is the purpose of this “glorious liberty,” this freedom to
which we have been called and for which we have been set free.

To be sure it is not as some have imagined the freedom to do my
own thing,

OR even the freedom to do my own thing so long as my own
thing doesn’t interfere with you doing your own thing.

The ideal of freedom that gave rise to American independence is
about more than individual liberty.

Indeed, Paul seems to suggest something quite the opposite in
his letter to the Galatians.

“You were called to freedom,” he wrote, “only do not use
your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but
through love become slaves to one another” (Galatians
5:13).

Wow, what a juxtaposition – “freedom” and “slaves.”

We aren't set free just for ourselves but to be in relationship with others.

He seems to be saying that real freedom means to be liberated from the prison of selfishness and free to care for each other.

I have been trying to imagine what this freedom would look like.

I'm thinking about Jesus, Jesus as Paul described him in his letter to the Philippians.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Jesus is the paradigm, the exemplar, the role model, of what freedom is about.

The purpose of freedom is so we can take the blessings that God has given to us and spread them around to others.

Isn't that what our foremothers and forefathers were about in birthing this nation?

It was at great cost to themselves that they took up the cause of liberty.

It was not to preserve for themselves the sweet blessings of liberty to which they pledged “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor”, but it was to make sure that these blessings were handed down to others.

That what freedom is about, that’s what you and I are called to be about as Americans.

Again Dr. Adams says, I believe that the United States has a particular calling-that we are called to be a servant people, bringing good news to the oppressed, modeling justice, proclaiming liberty to the captives. Can you even think of a time that called for moral leadership more than these troubled days? Oh, what an opportunity we have, what a responsibility we have-to repair, to raise up, to build up, to offer hope for all those who mourn in our midst and beyond our shores.”

The purpose of freedom is to take the God-given blessings of liberty and spread them around to every person, everywhere.

Hubert Humphrey once said, “It was once said that the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”

Friends, I suspect that this is the moral test not only of government, but of a nation, of a church, of an individual.

Perhaps in this season celebrating liberty – freedom – you and I would do well to measure the morality of our nation and of ourselves by how we treat “the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the homeless, and tempest-tossed” (Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*).

Moreover, to remind ourselves that the freedom for which we have been set free is a divine gift entrusted to that we might spread among everyone the blessings of liberty.