

“Prizing Our Liberties, Maintaining Our Rights”  
July 3, 2022

Isaiah 58:1-9

Galatians 5:1, 13-15

The Psalmist cries out: “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord!” And many find it easy to join in that cry. It is almost as if some think that the ancient Hebrew poet had the United States of America in mind when those words were written.

And certainly, this psalm has been used in a self-congratulatory manner, neglecting the ancient understanding that it is God, not the nation, who does the choosing.

If we listen closely to Psalm 33, however, we hear the Psalmist singing, not of national greatness, but of the forgiving grace of God. This grace, it has been said, is the “real power behind illusions of power.”<sup>i</sup>

We are a Christian community that does listen closely and carefully to scripture, a congregation that seeks to live in the real power of God’s forgiving grace.

As we listen and seek this morning, the question confronts us: How do we mark, observe, or even *celebrate* Independence Day this year?

How do we understand the promise and affirmation of the Declaration of Independence that all are created equal and endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, setting aside nearly 50 years of settled law, taking a right *away* from all women, and creating a great *inequality* in our nation?

The United Church of Christ has thought extensively and prayerfully about the issue of abortion for decades. Guided by scripture, theology, science, and compassion, our denomination’s support for abortion rights has been strong—and it has also been nuanced and evolving. More than fifty years ago in calling for an end to legal prohibitions on physician performed abortions, our General Synod acknowledged that “Our religious heritage has stressed reverence for human life,” and affirmed that God is the Source of all life.

Our affirmation of a woman’s right to choose an abortion or not to choose an abortion is rooted in our Christian faith that understands who God is and who we are as human beings.

As this religious perspective is now threatened, we have a good opportunity this weekend to reaffirm the freedom that we claim for ourselves and others.

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments we find the good news that God creates us for freedom and works that we might be free.

At its heart, our Congregational Way is a way of freedom.

This weekend we should remember and give thanks that in this nation—as flawed as our beginning was—there arose a new vision of the relationship between church and state without parallel in the other nations of the world.

In our land there would be no dominant church over the state.

There would be no state that would control the church.

Nor would the free citizens of this new nation be required to hold to certain religious beliefs.

It was a new vision of a free church in a free state. And when the Bill of Rights was added to our Constitution it included the words: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

*Freedom of religion* meant that government could not coerce people of faith to conform to regulations in doctrine, morals, or polity not of their church's own making.

*Freedom for religion* meant that religious leaders were free to speak their mind, even criticizing policies and practices of government without fear of punishment or retribution.

*Freedom from religion* meant that even atheists have rights of conscience in a free society. The power of government would be used to check the tyranny of religious groups against those who preferred no religion at all.

The Christian tradition has made vital contributions to American government. And those contributions are best seen and experienced in one word—freedom. This means freedom from coercion by government in religious matters and freedom from the doctrines of one faith being imposed on others by law.

Religious liberty, like all freedoms, was hard won.

In a free nation, the right to make decisions for oneself must be guarded. In a church like ours, with a tradition that affirms the right of individual conscience before God, we must continue to seek and use the freedom we have. We must also continue to gain and safeguard that freedom for others.

This is how Congregationalists have conceived our freedom. It is the freedom to follow the only One who deserves to be followed. It is the freedom to obey the real power behind the illusions of power.

Our freedom is grounded in the crucified and risen Christ.<sup>ii</sup> It is the freedom of the spirit that seeks out the freedom of the whole person—body, mind, and soul. And it is a freedom that seeks out the freedom of all people.

It has been said that in reversing *Roe*, the Supreme Court has returned the issue of abortion to the states, where it should be decided. While I disagree with this interpretation—as it gives rights in some states and takes rights away in other, creating a nation of inequality—I find encouragement for the work ahead in that great motto of this state. If the issue of the legality of abortion is to be decided by Iowans for Iowans, then let us do everything possible to prize our liberties and maintain our rights. This will include working to elect people who also will maintain and prize those liberties and rights. It will mean working to create laws that maintain and prize those liberties and rights.

Many were stunned, demoralized, and depressed by the Supreme Court decision. Many talked of leaving the country.

In love and humility, I say to all of us: Get over it. Get over it and get on with the tasks that are now set before us.

And know that our work for religious freedom and for personal choice will not be over quickly.

Those who opposed abortion rights worked incessantly for nearly fifty years to bring us to this time. They did not stop when pro-choice candidates were elected. They did not stop when the Supreme Court reaffirmed the right to abortion. They marched in protest, yes, but they also kept working year in and year out to elect legislators and appoint judges that would favor their cause. They did not stop after ten years or twenty years or thirty or forty.

We, too, must not, shall not stop.

It seems fitting, then that on this Sunday when we celebrate the independence of our nation, as we recommit ourselves to extending the rights and freedom that we perhaps took for granted, that we are also invited to be nourished with bread and cup at the Lord's Table. At this table we receive the freedom of the spirit that comes from forgiveness and Christ's presence with us

From this table of freedom we are sent out again into our ordinary days. From this table we are sent to live in the extraordinary freedom of the gospel.

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<sup>i</sup> "Psalm 33," *New Interpreter's Bible*

<sup>ii</sup> Page: 4

Ebeling, *The Truth of the Gospel*, pg. 243