

Sermon for Independence Day  
Wednesday, July 4, 2018  
“The High Price of Freedom”

Text: Matthew 5:43-48

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July is one of my favorite national holidays. It brings back memories of barbecues, summer fun, and fireworks. When I was growing up in the 1970s, my family would go to makeshift wooden shacks usually located in a grocery store parking lot, and buy boxes of home fireworks. Cones filled with gunpowder that would shimmer in brilliant colors when lit, sparklers that we could hold in our hands by a wire and wave about and brighten the hot summer darkness. My personal favorite was those little black pellets that when activated by a match would grow into long black snakes. We used to have a lot of fun celebrating the nation’s birthday. We still have a lot of fun celebrating the nation’s birthday, don’t we? Barbecues, hot dogs, parades, celebrations, and of course, fireworks are still very much a beloved part of this day. Only here in New York City, the fireworks are much more elaborate. The festivities began this past week, and last night as I began cooking and baking, I ran out several times to view the splendid fireworks that people had acquired around here that put those silly snakes and sparklers to shame. The Independence Day holiday has become very much a holy day, has it not? After all, a lot of people struggled and suffered for us to claim the freedoms that we say we have. In the 242 years since the Declaration of Independence wars have been fought, riots have been incited, people have marched in the streets of cities and towns, people have rallied behind various political figures, passionate leaders have emerged all for the sake of realizing that most precious phrase from the Declaration of Independence, “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.” Whomever the founding fathers envisioned when they said “all men,” we interpret that to mean *everybody*.

What does it mean to be free? What does it mean to have freedoms? It is all too easy to become complacent about it, because maybe we haven’t struggled to be where we are today like others did before. Or, maybe we are struggling in a different way. Many folks here paid a great price, took a great risk, to leave your native lands and pursue a new and better life

in these United States. I was born just months after the senseless assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. We spend days like today bragging about our freedoms, but the struggle is not over.

What is our responsibility as Christians on a day like today? What should we be thinking about as we contemplate the freedom that we celebrate today? The Gospel makes it quite clear: Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Why? So that we may be children of our Father in heaven. It may be a cloudy day or we may live through a storm, but eventually, the same sun shines on everyone. The fight for freedom still continues, because so many of our citizens don’t enjoy the freedoms that we think we have. We say every is equal, yet there are bakers who refuse to bake cakes, because they disagree with the couple’s personal choice as to whom to marry. The average income of women is far lower than that of men. People still face discrimination and presumptions of character because of the color of their skin. This is a nation of immigrants, our Constitution says that all people are created equal, yet we want to deny immigrants, especially those from certain countries, the ability to start over and make a new life for themselves within our borders. We fail to respect people of different faith traditions whose lives and lifestyles are different. We don’t want to pay for somebody else’s health care. Native Americans, the people who lived on American soil long before most people’s ancestors came here—however they came and for whatever reason—have for centuries been mistreated and forced to live on reservations where poverty, crime, and alcoholism & drug abuse are far above the national average. Every day we encounter stories of individuals or groups of people not being treated as though they are equal, as though they are children of God. Sadly, too many of the people doing these things call themselves Christians. But the gospel this morning is quite clear, and Jesus put no conditions on his mandate to us. If we can love those who are dear to us, we must also love those who are not. In Jesus’s time tax collectors were considered to be among the worst folk. Most were Jewish, Israelites, who were collecting taxes for the Romans. They were the sell-outs. But, Jesus said even they deserve love and respect, because they are children of God.

The price of freedom is very, very high. Many people have paid it, but we are still being sent a bill. As long as we have laws that apply to some people and not others, we’re still being sent a bill. As long as there is disparity between rich and poor, we are still being sent a bill. As long as all people in this country don’t have decent health care, we are still

being sent a bill. As long as kids in our city schools have fewer resources and a less adequate education because they live in less affluent neighborhoods, we are still being sent a bill. As long as people are sleeping in the streets or families go hungry because they can't afford housing and food, we are still being sent a bill. As long as people are being mistreated and discriminated against because of the color of their skin, or the language they speak, or the faith by which they relate to the Almighty or the person they choose to love and marry, or their political position, or the amount of money they have, we are still being sent a bill. And for Christians, that bill comes with sales tax. The sales tax are the words of our Lord who instructed us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and love those who don't love us back.

But we have a way of paying the bill. There is redemption and hope. The waters of baptism are where that all begins. In our Baptismal Covenant we vow to resist evil, seek and serve Christ in all persons, strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being. The waters of baptism into the Body of Christ mean that we must not fall into the injustices and inequalities that plague the world. It also means that we are committed to fight for the freedom of everyone, not with guns and weapons, but with love, every day, in our daily lives and in how we treat one another.

Yes, there is something holy about this day, and we Christians must be willing to stand up and stand firm so that all people are loved simply because they are children of God. That's what freedom really is. The freedom to love as we'd like to be loved. The freedom to live our lives as the image of God and to love unconditionally as our Father loves us. Amen.