

July 5, 2015
Independence Day 2015
Land of the Free
Galatians 5:1-6

Opening words: This is the history of Independence Day. In June of 1776, a Virginian by the name of Richard Henry Lee proposed an American independence from England. The idea kept gaining support until the Second Continental Congress voted for independence from England on July 2, 1776. The group decided a document needed to explain their actions. A committee of five was selected; the chief writer was Thomas Jefferson. He submitted the document back to the Congress, who tweaked the wording. It was approved on the July 4, 1776. Richard Henry Lee became one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Copies were made, and the new nation embraced their independence. Because this Declaration of Independence was dated July 4, not July 2, it was viewed as our Independence Day. How are you celebrating this Independence Day?

We are instructed on this Independence Day weekend from the epistle to the Galatians. It was written by the Apostle Paul about the year A.D. 50. It was not written just to a single congregation, but to a variety of congregations in a single area. The issue that speaks clearly to us this morning is Old Testament Law. There were Jewish converts, who insisted that Old Testament law must still be observed and practiced. To be precise, the topic is circumcision. Paul understood clearly, that we are saved by grace, and not the law. Christ set us free from Old Testament law. With this understanding, let us hear this morning's scripture lesson, Galatians 5:1-6. Let me call this message *Land of the Free*.

Galatians 5:1-6 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Everyone knows the name Elizabeth Taylor. She lived her life in the spotlight. She was born in a London suburb to American parents in 1932, so she had dual citizenship, the United States and Britain. At the age of twelve, she landed a part in the movie *National Velvet*. After that movie other movies came, *Father of the Bride*, *A Place in the Sun*, *Giant*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. She won an Academy Award in 1960 for her part in *Butterfield 8*. She won a second Academy Award in 1966 for her role in the movie, *Who is Afraid of Virginia Wolf*. She became known for her glamorous lifestyle, beauty and her violet eyes. She had a great life, until she discovered the

Golden Corral, started designing bad jewelry and became friends with Michael Jackson and his chimp, Bubbles. Do you think we know too much about Elizabeth Taylor? This is something you may not know. Did you know that in 1965 Elizabeth Taylor signed a document renouncing her American citizenship? However, in 1977, she reapplied for American citizenship when she married her seventh husband, Senator John Warner. (Don't forget she was married eight times.)

Would anyone here sign a document renouncing your American citizenship? Did you know in 2013, according to CNBC, a record 2,999 Americans gave up their citizenship? They say the number one reason people gave up their American citizenship was tax reasons. Can I give you some pastoral advice? Don't do it. I have been to some amazing places in this world. I have been to Canada and Mexico. I have been to Haiti and the Philippines. I have been to Great Britain and France. I have been to Italy and Germany. I have been to Russia and Ukraine. I have been to Belarus and Holland. I have been to all those places. Each one was amazing, each one was different. However, they all have one thing in common. None of them can hold a candle to the United States. After each trip, I was ready to come home. I do not make that statement based on emotional patriotism, I make that statement based on fact. America is still the land of the free. I would love to know why Elizabeth Taylor renounced her American citizenship. She was too bright to do something so foolish.

I do not claim to be an expert on the US Constitution. However, I have seen it on display in Washington DC. It is moving to see it in person. I have a basic understanding of how it works. It is the supreme law of our land and set us apart from the rest of the world. Generally, it protects individual liberties, while it places limits on the role of the government. It has been called a living document because it is always changing. Did you know that since the Constitution came into force in 1789, it has been amended twenty-seven times? I do not have time to talk about all of our freedoms, but I do have time to talk about three. Those three have shaped us as a country. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Freedom of Choice

In America, we have freedom of choice. In other words, we live in a democracy. We believe in a government that is run by the people. That is why your private ballot is so important. The majority wins! The opposite of a democracy is a dictatorship. In a dictatorship all the power is controlled by a person or a small clique. A dictatorship may be more efficient than a democracy, but it is also more sinister. Would anyone here like to move to China, North Korea or Venezuela? They have a dictatorship. According to planetruler.com, there are fifty dictatorships in the world today.

The other day it was announced that New Jersey governor Chris Christie is running for president. He is number fourteen on the Republican side of the ballot. If Ohio governor John Kasich runs, he will be number fifteen. On the Democratic side, Hilary Clinton seems to be the front runner of the five. Have you ever felt like you are the only one not running for President? Let me say this clearly. I will never encourage you to vote for

a certain candidate because churches are not permitted to endorse candidates; we can only back issues. However, I will always encourage you to vote. I was taught, if you don't vote, then you can't complain. Don't tell me you don't understand the issues, don't tell me they are all the same, don't tell me they are all criminals. Use your education and be an educated voter. In America, we have the freedom of choice. Don't waste it. There will be no voting this year in North Korea. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Freedom of Speech

In America, we have freedom of speech. In other words, you have the right to say anything that you want, no matter how foolish it makes you look. Some believe the best part of every newspaper is the editorial page. On the editorial page everyone gets to exercise their freedom of speech.

You may have heard that the Supreme Court redefined marriage. When I was born the world understood marriage to be between a man and a woman. Now, marriage can occur between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman. I was still working on Kaitlin Jenner, and now this! I do not know if I like the ruling, but it is the law of the land. Let's just be honest. It is a big deal. The clergy of our Annual Conference received a letter shortly after the ruling. The ruling really had no effect on the United Methodist Church. We are not required to officiate at same-sex marriages. We still see marriage as between a man and a woman. I am sure the issue will be brought up next year at General Conference in Portland, Oregon. Do you believe changing the definition of marriage would be the Waterloo of our denomination? I do. Do you believe changing the definition of marriage would be the best thing that ever happened to our denomination? How do you feel about same-sex marriages? The gay and lesbian community has been celebrating since the announcement. I read that in New York City two million people showed up for the gay pride parade. Our country's largest city was filled with energy. Like it or not, we have freedom of speech. In Istanbul, the crowds gathered to celebrate gay pride. They were met with water cannons. If you are glad the constitution gives us freedom of speech, say, **"Amen!"**

Freedom of Religion

In America, we have freedom of religion. The very first amendment to the constitution is the freedom of religion. I do not believe that was an accident. It was intentional because so many came to North America originally seeking religious freedom. Your faith can take any form. You can follow any set of beliefs you desire. According to the Gallup Poll, 77% of our country is Christian. That means 23% of our country are non-believers. Did you know many of the patriots didn't identify themselves as a Christian?

During the time of the American Revolution there was a great theological movement called Deism. It was the backend of the enlightened age. That school of thought believed the human mind had the potential to solve the world's problems. Deists believed in the power of the mind too. Deists believed God created the world and set natural law in order. It was at that point that God removed himself from the world.

Natural law could not be broken. There was no sense in praying for a miracle because natural law couldn't be broken. There was no sense in believing in the resurrection of Jesus, because it broke natural law. In varying degrees, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Ethan Allan, and even George Washington were deists. Thomas Jefferson had his Bible rewritten to eliminate all the miracles. His Bible was a third of the size of yours. They chose to believe in Deism. You chose to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. You made the right choice! Let's look at the text for this morning.

The word that jumps out to us in the first verse is 'freedom'. Paul is not talking about freedom from foreign domination. He is talking about freedom from Old Testament law. In other words, the men that have gathered here this morning have nothing to fear. No one has to be circumcised today. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are not saved by the law, we are saved by grace. We are not to live by the law, we are to live by faith. In America, we have religious freedom. If you have chosen to follow Jesus, our risen savior, say, "**Amen!**"

Yesterday, in Northampton, Mass., our country welcomed 52 new citizens. They represented 27 different countries from around the globe. They came from Algeria, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, Mexico, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. It must have been quite a scene. The emotions of our country's newest citizens must have been running high. Do you know how hard it is to become a legal nationalized citizen of the United States? It isn't just a matter of showing up for a ceremony.

These are the requirements:

1. You must be an LPR, a lawful permanent resident. In other words, you must first hold a green card or have served in the military.
2. You must live in the United States at least five years.
3. You must read, write and speak ordinary English.
4. You must have a basic understanding of United States history and government.
5. You must have a basic understanding of the United States Constitution.
6. You must be of good moral character. That means you have paid your taxes and not gotten involved in any criminal activity.

Could you complete all those requirements to become a citizen? I feel truly fortunate to just be born here. Those 52 people worked hard to stand with us and they would do it again. They worked hard to be called an American because they know there is something special about America, and so do you. We live in the land of the free. As any of those 52 would tell you, America stands alone. Abraham Lincoln once said, "*My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope on earth.*" If that is your dream too, say, "**Amen!**"

Will you pray with me?