

SERMON FOR JULY 4 WEEKEND: Hope (based on Galatians 5:1)

Let us pray: O Lord our God, from the foundations of time your children have been held in bondage to the world, to the flesh and to the Evil One. Again and again, we have wrestled to be free, but of our own power and will. We have yet to overcome all that would enslave us. In our moments of arrogance, we think that someday we will be free, but in our moments of honesty we know that without you, we will never find freedom. Come in this very hour and give us the gift of freedom. We pray in need and humility. Amen.

We've concluded our July 4th Independence Day celebrations, so let's talk today about something dear to us, something at the forefront of our minds as Americans, that is freedom. Freedom.

How can we define freedom without first addressing the reality of our captivity? Captivity comes in many packages, yet in every instance it has the same effect upon us. It keeps us from being free. Some captivity is external, some internal and some, both.

This issue of freedom is not theoretical or philosophical, but actual. Each one of us is captive to something. Captive

to disease, substance abuse, racism, poverty, control, any of a thousand different things.

As spiritual people, we also admit we are captive to sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Can you hear the honesty of my language? Bondage, slavery, captive. No, we are not free, not as individuals before God and not even before each other.

Reflecting upon our country this past week as we celebrate our national freedom, I have mixed feelings. I love the Fourth of July and I love to celebrate all that it represents, but America appears to me to be out of control. Some freedoms seem tenuous.

Long-standing revered institutions which have held our civilization together are failing and falling apart.

Our federal government has done little efficiently or effectively in years except wage war. What was our last real American triumph? Landing a man on the moon?

The national debt increases while programs like social security and Medicare are threatened.

And our national character has changed. Our culture is seldom a

caring, empathetic culture. We have become a mean and angry people. And heaven forbid you be “other.” Heaven forbid that you be a person of another color, another sexual orientation or identity, another immigrant. Our country is not forgiving and welcoming of the others. We make it difficult for the others. Never realizing that we are a nation of others...

Public education is under attack right here, right now with the school voucher plan. If public education succeeds, it takes way more effort, time and money than it should.

My list continues: The criminal justice system neither prevents nor punishes crime.

Organized religion is a dinosaur. Some consultants believe Mainline Protestantism may be extinct within the next twenty years unless we intentionally make some necessary changes. Contact Greg or me for the latest report from our denomination addressing this pressing reality.

The churches that are growing in America are those who peddle a soft narcotic prosperity religion. Or those who identify themselves as mission congregations because the greatest mission field in the world today is just outside these walls.

Most Americans claim they believe in God, but they are not even casually, much less actively, involved in a religious movement or congregation. We are living in the age of mission and the mission field is your neighborhood.

I'm not giving you a pessimistic diagnosis of America, I'm saying that we live in a precarious time.

I am not discouraged enough to give up. It is a precarious time, but also a time great potential. There are some solid reasons to be hopeful. I still want to give the rest of my life to making my little piece of our country, my little piece of the world a better place. I hope you do, too.

Let me give you something to consider. First, we must admit that our social situation is serious. We are disillusioned because we have believed in an illusion for about fifty years now.

I agree with historian Paul Johnson's answer of why Americans feel so bad when we have it so good. He says the Founding Fathers were represented by two kinds of people whose viewpoints balanced each other.

One group was made up of visionary entrepreneurs. They dreamed of religious utopia based upon the Judeo-Christian ethic. The poor from Europe could come here and fulfill their dreams

of having plenty. The supply of free or cheap land was unlimited. These visionaries were missionary fanatics, especially the Calvinists and Puritans.

Balancing the religious utopians were pragmatic, hardnosed businessmen like Thomas Jefferson. They saw the dangers which lay in garnishing power, incurring federal debt and worshipping material prosperity at the expense of justice.

Throughout our country's history, these two factions balanced each other. For instance, every time the visionaries ran up the federal debt the pragmatists brought it back down.

Then something crucial happened. The utopian dream was cut loose from its religious foundation. It became a secular utopian dream. It was no longer a dream tied to faith, but tied to government. Government would be able to provide happiness, prosperity and tranquility to every citizen and cure all our problems.

Historian Paul Johnson feels that we are now in a national state of melancholy because we know we cannot keep living this way. Hocking our children's future. Not maintaining order. Not giving the educational system back to parents. Not addressing environmental issues. Not recovering our spiritual center.

I hope and believe we are on the verge of a reawakening of a national conscience, which I take to mean a moral and spiritual revival. I will not be disheartened to the point of giving up, of resigning from society because my hope does not rest on the rise and fall of any political, social or economic structure.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.” (Psalm 121)

No country has been able to assimilate people of different cultures like us. No nation in history has been able to make deep-rooted social changes like us. When we were in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, political analysts were singing America’s death song. Democracy had failed. The great experiment was a bust.

But what did we do? We adjusted. We adapted. We worked together. We sacrificed. We knew that the good of all people was more important than the success of a privileged few. And we recovered.

Now when I say we could be on the edge of our finest hour, I do not mean America is about to rule the world or should rule the world. I mean America could lead the world toward a new and true unity of nations. We have the

power to oversee the unification of the world, technologically, economically, politically and yes, even spiritually.

Earlier I said that America is now the world's greatest mission field. Over ninety percent of Americans pray every day, but most, about 2/3rds, no longer participate in a congregation.

So here is my hope. All our would-be saviors have failed us. Let us never settle for idols of our own creation. The challenge of the church today is not to give you something to believe in, but to give you something to hope for.

Let us be free. Let us be complete Christians, which to me means accepting our justification with God. Justification means that we are made right with God. And then, let us respond to being justified through grace. To have a humble faith. To be moved to hope, even if that means to suffer and endure, in order to build a Christ-like character which reflects joy, authentic joy. Such an attitude involves the whole person in commitment to faith through Jesus Christ.

We will never be free until that happens. And our country will never change until we embrace a religion of head, heart, hands and feet.

“For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not let

yourself be burdened by the yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)