

Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M Fluent, Pastor

July 5, 2020

Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list. You may also want to open the video of the National Anthem, played as a trumpet solo by David Suder as you prepare yourself for worship on this day.

Today is the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. This Sunday falls on the weekend when our nation is celebrating Independence Day. On this day we celebrate the American dream of freedom and remember those critical moments in our history when the freedoms promised in our historic documents were reinterpreted to include a rainbow of humanity not imagined by our founders. And it is a time to give thanks for God's blessing upon our people and God's calling that the dreams of freedom and justice in our land be entirely fulfilled for all.

As we begin our worship today, let us listen to the words of James Weldon Johnson. The poem is sung as a hymn in many churches this Sunday, especially those of African American background. It reminds us that our history is filled with the struggles of many people so that our nation might achieve the greatness that comes with liberty, equality and justice for all:

Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark path has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.*

*Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our people sighed?*

*We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.*

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

*Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee;
Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.*

Call to Worship

As we gather ourselves for worship today, let us give thanks to God for the blessings of our national dream, inscribed in our founding documents but only made real in the struggle of history, and let us give thanks for the people of many nations whose varied gifts have contributed to the making of America. We remember that some of our forebears came as adventurers, some as criminals, some seeking religious freedom, some forced here by poverty, and some taken here in bondage. We remember that some who preceded all the others were dispossessed of their lands and heritage. We remember those who gave their lives in defense of the freedoms we value. We remember that we have all not always been good to one another, but that God has been good to us. And we remember that we still have dreams that are unfulfilled as we seek the ways of justice in this land of many peoples. Come Holy Spirit.

Our Scripture lesson for today is taken from the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, chapter 5, verse 1 and verses 13 to 26. The specific issue being dealt with here is that someone has told the people in Galatia that they can't become Christians without first being circumcised in accordance with the Jewish tradition of the Galatian church. This would exclude those non-Jewish converts for whom the practice has no meaning. In making his argument, Paul declares that the message of Christ is a message of freedom:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery....

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon delivered by the Pastor, you may do so by going to the church website and looking under "messages from the pastor" or by clicking the link on an email that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

"For freedom Christ has set us free."

On this American Independence Day weekend, it feels good to be reminded by Scripture of the divine gift of freedom. The governments of the ancient world did not provide many examples of freedom, nor did many of the religious institutions of that day. So Paul's words may have sounded both strange and wonderful to the people of Galatia, who had been

attracted to the God worshipped by Jewish believers who lived in the region, but had not become members of the Jewish synagogue, which would have required the initiation rite of circumcision. Paul was a Jewish man who had become a follower of Jesus and had brought the message of the Gospel to Galatia. He was an extraordinary person in his time, because he had felt the unusual calling to become an evangelist of the Jesus movement, not only to the Jews, but to the non-Jewish world as well. Paul was not a Christian in the sense that church members of a later generation would be. He spent his entire life as a Jewish believer, but he had been captivated by the message of Jesus that he had heard; and he had come to the realization that these teachings were as relevant to someone of another culture as they were to his own community of faith. So he invited people to become followers of Jesus, whether they shared the traditions and customs of Israel or not.

It is one of the ironies of history that the church that developed out of this wonderful openness to people unfamiliar with the traditions of Israel became persuaded later on that it should seek to convert the so-called pagan world not only to the teachings of Jesus but also to the dominant European culture in which the religion came to be clothed.

A Hawaiian friend used to tease me about how our UCC missionaries were responsible for his people having to learn to wear English clothing. More seriously, Native American friends have told me about their parents being taken as children to religious schools in Pennsylvania to be taught to reject their native culture, language and beliefs. The use of religion as a tool of European dominance is an unfortunate part of our history, and remnants of those attitudes can still be found among us. They were present as well at the founding of our nation, and revealed in the institution of slavery. Nonetheless, when our nation was founded as a democratic republic, somehow even among those flawed and slaveholding patriots of the Revolution, that old idea that people should be free to be themselves in Christ managed to persist and be one of the important influences that motivated the writing of our documents of freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free." Paul had said. "Stand firm, therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

I wonder why we Americans like to argue so much about the faith of the founding fathers. Some were religious and some weren't, but it is absolutely clear that none of them wanted to establish a Christian nation. They'd left one of those behind; it was called England, and they didn't want it back! They did, of course, believe in a Creator, by whom we are endowed with the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – a wonderful summary of what freedom should mean, even though they hadn't figured out yet that it should apply to everyone. Well, anyway they said it, and the history of the United States has been, from one perspective, the story of a great struggle to obtain the rights that guarantee our freedom for all those people who didn't get them from the beginning. To my

way of thinking, completing this noble task should be the great religious mission for all of us who call ourselves Christian and also citizens of the Republic.

It seems to me that it is important for us Christians, and all other people of faith, as well, for that matter, to learn how to be free people in a democratic country that we live in with others. That shouldn't be hard, but I keep hearing Christian people complaining that someone (often the government) has kept them from practicing their faith in this diverse society, though for the life of me I can't understand how they can feel that way. The argument usually sounds something like this: You can't pray in school anymore; or, people shouldn't have to bake a cake for a wedding they don't believe in; or, why is it that we can't have a worship service in our own church without wearing masks? Or, we used to have a nice nativity scene on the courthouse yard, but they won't let us do that anymore. Or, everything used to close down Sunday morning for church, but now Sunday morning is taken up by sports. Or, with a certain belligerence, nobody's going to tell me I can't say Merry Christmas if I want to!

Real quick: There is no law that says you can't pray in school, just that you can't make other people pray with you or interrupt the school day for others. Baking a cake is not a religious activity. If you do it for profit you should do it for anybody who wants it. If you want a nativity scene to express your faith, put one in your home or churchyard. Just leave it off the public square, where others don't love it as much as you do. The coronavirus doesn't know whether you're Christian or not, so when you gather in a group in church without masks you are putting yourself and your neighbors of all faiths in jeopardy. Competition on Sunday morning bothers Protestant Christians the same way that things happening on Friday bother Muslims and things happening on Saturday bother Jews. It's not anti-Christian; it's equal opportunity annoyance. And it's a free country, so you can say Merry Christmas if you want to. No law forbids it. Just don't get upset if somebody says, Happy Hannukah to you. He's probably Jewish.

All of these complaints in fact have something in common. They are not about the religious freedom of Christians being restricted. They are about living respectfully with other people. They are about caring about other people's feelings and other people's freedom to express their own convictions. When we start feeling grouchy about such things, it isn't because our religious freedom has been lost, it's because we don't like giving up some aspect of Christian privilege that we grew up thinking rightfully belonged to us.

Being free to practice our religious faith and caring at the same time about our neighbors who may hold different beliefs are both good Christian practices that are also supported by democratic societies. But freedom for Christian believers is not a gift for us to

passively enjoy. It is something to be used. This is where I agree with those who want religion restored to the center of our lives. The churches of America at our best have always spoken in a prophetic witness to our society about moral and ethical wrongs. For a generation or more, we've been worrying about the decline of American religion. Does the decline of American religious influence disturb me? You bet it does! But I don't want to put a manger scene on the Statehouse lawn. I want to put a manger scene on the church lawn and send a message to the Statehouse about the hungry and homeless people churches see at their food pantries each month. Does the lack of religious motivation in our society disturb me? You bet it does! But I don't want to make a bunch of kids stand quietly in school while some innocuous prayer is read to a god they scarcely know! I want us to teach our kids that they can pray anywhere and anytime they want to, even without a Supreme Court decision, because it has never been against the law; and that God listens to our prayers, and that God is the only one who needs to listen to them. And I want our kids to go to school and stand up for the rights and safety of others in the name of their faith in Jesus Christ. I want them to get mad about bullying, wherever they see it. I want them to express their repulsion at the hate graffiti that are sprayed on people's property in communities across America, because they have learned from their parents and their church that such actions are hurtful and wrong. I want them to learn to protest when a child of another color is shot by a policeman, not because they don't like police officers, but because they know that such actions result from a community that uses the police to enforce the exclusion of people of color from their neighborhoods.

And do I want the churches to be restored to their positions of influence in the public sector once again? You bet I do, but not so we can get special treatment, tax benefits and blue laws on Sunday, but so that our voice can be heard loud and clear about Biblical values like the urgency of health care, good housing and a living wage for all our citizens, a compassionate response to the refugees who come to our shores, and good stewardship of the earth that God has given us.

Every year on the Fourth of July, I give thanks for the freedoms we enjoy as citizens of this nation, especially the freedom of religion which has allowed our church and everybody's church, or mosque or synagogue or temple, to thrive here. I pray that religious faith will come to be at the center of our society's life again, but I think we'll have to wait for that until faith becomes the center of our own lives and calls us to exercise the freedom to engage in the prophetic witness that is inherent in our creed.

But I don't doubt for a moment that we have the freedom to do it.

Sacrament of Holy Communion

(We invite you to share in the Communion meal with us. All are welcome at the table. Since we are participating in worship from our homes, please feel welcome to find some kind of food and drink that can be blessed as the elements of the sacramental meal.)

Today, we are separated physically again, but we know that the Spirit of Christ is not limited, and if we take the food and drink in Jesus' name, he is present with us and we are spiritually united.

Remember, then, that on the night on which he was betrayed, our Lord took bread. He broke it and gave it to his friends at table with him, saying "This is my body which is given for you. Take and eat. Do this in remembrance of me." Then he also took the cup, and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood that is shed for you and for many for the remission of sin. Drink of it, all of you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Spirit of Christ, be known among us. May this meal of your body and blood unite our hearts in you and remind us that we are one. As we take these elements in our homes, may we sense the spiritual table around which we are gathered in love. We pray for all our friends within this congregation, especially those who are lonely in this time of separation. We pray for the people of Cincinnati and the State of Ohio as we confront the problems of illness and civil unrest in these troubled times. We pray for our Nation on this Independence Day, and we promise to lift up in our hearts the good and hopeful words of the Declaration of Independence as a calling to us to be faithful in our commitments to one another and the great American dream. We pray as well for all the nations of humankind, in the recognition that we live together on this small planet that holds the precious gift of life and summons our efforts to use its resources well. God bless the nations. God bless our leaders. God bless us all, and teach us how to love one another.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Let us now receive our Communion Meal:

The body of Christ. Take and eat.

The blood of Christ. Take and drink.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

