

A Fourth of July Communion Meditation
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
July 4, 2021

Acts 10:30-36

The fourth of July is more than a long weekend to grill hotdogs and watch fireworks (although, in full disclosure, I do love all of that!)

It's a time when it's right and appropriate to look back at the ideals that shaped this nation, like those found in 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."

What a grand notion! These words sprung from the minds and hearts of our founding fathers, they were debated with passion and good intent, written down and affirmed by the signatures of the elected representatives of the original thirteen colonies.

Elite men, power brokers of a new nation, dared to not only challenge the most powerful empire in the world (England), but did so with lofty ideals that included the revolutionary thought that we are all created with innate equality and God-given rights.

We know that in the days, weeks, months, years and decades since, that these words have inspired men and women to seek and honor life in this nation; a search that has come at great cost and through many obstacles, since freedom is as valuable to the hearts of men and women, and is craved as deeply as food and water... and we haven't always gotten it right.

I appreciate one of the opening numbers of the Broadway Musical Hamilton, when Big sister Angelica Schuyler raps:

*I've been reading Common Sense by Thomas Paine
So men say that I'm intense or I'm insane
You want a revolution? I want a revelation*

*So listen to my declaration:
"We hold these truths to be self-evident
That all men are created equal"
And when I meet Thomas Jefferson,
I'll compel him to include women in the sequel!¹*

Author Lin-Manuel Miranda meant to poke a little fun at the thought (lest we forget) that the founding fathers did not really have women (or, for that matter, Native Americans and Black slaves) in mind when it came to their vision of equality.

It was not easy back then to pursue these values, and it's not really easy now. And yet, this central, genuine belief in equality was instituted by our founders, and it has been carried by so many Americans ever since... even though....

We've had a long hard hike up a huge mountain to get to women's suffrage and equality.

We've had a long hard hike out of the desert of slavery and the drowning sea of Jim Crow laws.

We've had a long hard hike out of the wilderness trail of tears, boarding schools and genocide of Native Americans.

This journey has, in fact, haunted us, motivated and moved us, for two-hundred and forty-five years.

We have not finally accepted the "othering" of another as natural law. What we HAVE accepted is the self-evident truth that all are created equal and entitled to rights that cannot be taken away, which I believe that is a gift from God.

We know that the notion of equality runs deep in the Bible, too. In the very first chapter we are told that ALL people are made in God's image. Paul puts it like this in his letter to the Galatians when he beautifully wrote, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"² Peter echoes this as we heard in today's reading from the Book of Acts.

¹ Lyrics from Hamilton, the Musical "The Schuyler Sisters"

² Galatians 3:8

Jesus declares in Luke that he came *“to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...³”* And all the things Jesus came to do, the feeding, the healing, the teaching, it can all be understood as moving his people towards equality.

The Pilgrims who first came to the shores of this continent did so in an effort to find religious freedom. Daring to cross the high seas, in boats which we would not likely declare seaworthy, bringing with them just enough provisions to get started in a new homeland.

They drew their inspiration from the history of their faith, which told of those bold enough to hear God’s call to venture into the wilderness. *“Behold I will do a new thing,”* God declares in the words of Isaiah. *“Now it shall spring forth. I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...to give drink to my people, my chosen.”⁴*

These pilgrims drew further inspiration from the words and preaching of their minister John Winthrop, who became the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1630, Winthrop preached an inspirational sermon on board the ship Arbella, shortly before the passengers of the ships in that caravan, disembarked and founded the city of Boston. Winthrop challenged and inspired them to think about the burden that settling in a new land would bring them. *“For we must consider that we shall be like a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are on us.”* (op. cit. p. 6)

One of the greatest interfaces of faith and freedom comes in way that both our nation and our church affirms, respects and seeks to honor the individual. The laws and courts of our nation continually seek to find ways to allow for an individual to follow their heart and be free. It is, as the courts and media remind us daily, a work in progress. But what a joy to live in a land where that work continues, and God willing, continues to progress.

³ Luke 4:18-19

⁴ Isaiah 43:19-20

While we in our nation have gloried in our freedom, we have, at times, failed to live in ways worthy of these blessings and the sacrifices that so many have made to secure them for us. Far too many of us and our fellow citizens have disregarded our moral responsibility to care for the least, the lost and the last.

You and I cannot truly be free until everyone around us is free, too.

Chaplain to the US Senate, Peter Marshall once said, "*May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right.*"

We would be wise to remember that Jesus said much the same in a different way. Speaking to the disciples and all who could hear, he proclaimed that to those whom God has given much, much more will be expected.

And we would be wise, as 21st century American Christians, to give prayerful thought and reflection to what this means to us today.

This July 4th holiday weekend, may we pause to pray, think and follow Jesus in the ways of the faithful.

And may the Holy One who blessed and guided those who crafted the Declaration of Independence so many years ago, guide, bless and inspire us. Amen.