

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

July 4, 2010

“Let Freedom Ring”

Rev. Valerie Oden

Galatians 5: 13-14

You’ve heard it before, I’ll say it again: We live in a great country. After all, only in America can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance; only in America do people order double cheese burgers, large fries, and a diet coke; only in America do we leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put our useless junk in the garage; and only in America do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.

Yes, it’s a great country. Today we remember its roots. We were all taught them, in school, as children. I remember it well. It was Mrs. Gallagher’s third grade Social Studies class: “Okay, children, it’s time to learn what it means to be an American. During this unit, we are going to learn about the Declaration of Independence. And we are going to memorize some of it.”

The groans were a little bit out of habit, because we weren’t really sure what those big words meant, and we could barely sound them out as she wrote them on the blackboard: Declaration of Independence. But we knew the word “memorize,” and we knew it meant time away from playing.

Every child in the United States has to memorize part of the preamble to 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 inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”*

Happiness is an interesting word to me. Children relate to it well. Adults? I remember once many years ago talking to a friend who had just had to uproot her life when her spouse got a new job in a new state. She was now far from the land of her childhood, far from her friends and family. I asked her if she was happy. Happy? She said. Happy is a strange word. I don’t think I’m happy. But I’m fulfilled.

If you are not among those who consider themselves “happy”, do not worry that you have been left out of the American dream. I believe the wisdom of our founding fathers was deep and vast. I believe they meant by the word happiness a quality that we’ve lost in our common use of the word. I believe 230 years ago, they meant something more akin to “fulfillment.”

The way I see it, happiness is a stingy word. Fulfillment is available for all, no matter what. Happy is somehow tied to what’s going on around us, tied to what situations we find ourselves in on any given day. Fulfilled is about what’s going on within us, in the midst of every situation we find ourselves in on any given day. Fulfilled is about breath, the breath of the deep. It’s about grace. It’s about settling into the love that knows no bounds, and moving out from there into this world.

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In some sense, happiness might be about the individual. Fulfillment is about the whole. Those who fought for freedom during the revolutionary war were most likely not happy. But I can imagine them fulfilled, because they would have known that what they were doing had purpose, meaning, for the whole that extended far beyond them.

I certainly cannot imagine Jesus happy on the cross. But fulfilled? Fulfillment seems to hold a higher, wider, deeper perspective than happiness.

That story of him on the cross doesn't begin there, of course. It's folded into generations before him and the people's journey toward freedom from oppression. Consider the Israelites in slavery to Pharaoh, and Moses gaining their freedom. As they wandered in the desert thirsty and hungry, they yearned to be back in Pharaoh's hands where at least they were given water. And in the midst of being unhappy, they were called forward through the wilderness by a higher dream of fulfillment.

Generations later, as the children of Israel found themselves in what we call the Babylonian exile, they were taken from their precious temple where they believed God abided. In the midst of their unhappiness, they found a way to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. They found a way to relate to God beyond the temple. That wasn't about happiness. It was about the higher purpose of fulfillment in the midst of bad circumstances.

The Roman Empire was oppressive to the have-nots, and onto the scene came Jesus, taking on the authorities by proclaiming the worth of everyone—the sinners and prostitutes, the poor and downtrodden. The people were waiting for an earthly king who would give them freedom from oppression. He spoke of being free in the Truth.

Is that kind of freedom tied to happiness? Or does it find its wings in a vision of fulfillment, possible for all?

How do we find our greatest fulfillment? Do we find it in living for ourselves? Or in living for the common good? Is it more fulfilling to narrow our perspective down to our own desires or to maintain a vision of goodness for the whole?

Being fulfilled seems to me to have everything to do with freedom. The truth shall set you free, said Jesus. In what sense?

Paul has something to say about that. "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.<sup>14</sup> For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Is the freedom we are offered tied to loving others? Most likely, since loving others is the base of our lives as people of faith. But is loving others a pre-requisite to being truly free? Or is it a result? Is loving others required before we are truly free? Or does loving others spring out of knowing we are truly free?

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This morning in churches all over the country there will no doubt be sermons, some eloquent some not so eloquent, about how the soldiers paid the price for our freedom, and so did Christ. Many *have* died for our freedom, and we *are* grateful. But the sermons preached in many churches this morning will speak of how we are free because Jesus died for our sins and how the only way anyone in the world can know real freedom is through him.

We here at AUMC have a different story to tell. We know a story of Jesus on the cross that speaks of an oppressive power that executed him because he looked out for those with no voice. We know a story that points to the compassion of Jesus for the lowliest around him. We know a story of his constant call for justice. .

We know a story of freedom in our souls not because he died on the cross, but because of how he lived. We know that the value of our freedom is directly related to how we live our lives. We know that what we do with our freedom matters. We know it doesn't end with us, but that each decision we make will echo through the generations, extending beyond our personal lives to a greater whole.

Do we also know that there is nothing to wait for to be free? That we are truly free in our hearts no matter what our outer circumstances? Do we know that we are not victims of our circumstances but rather that every hardship in our lives is an invitation to dig deeper into a way of being that emanates goodness? Do we know that each moment is a precious gift to be cherished and lived well?

Do we also know that tragedy puts life in perspective and renders meaningless the daily squabbles of life?

Do we know that tonight as people from the neighborhood come to this lawn on this hill their only introduction to the Jesus we know and the faith as we see it may be us?

Do we know that that's the case with every moment of our lives?

Do we know that as we gather at this table today we are remembering Jesus' love for all? Can we experience the true freedom of heart that comes with joining at Jesus' table, from which no one, no matter what, is left out, ever?

Can we re-commit ourselves this morning to the story as we know it, to the freedom in Christ that is about the value of compassion for all, to the love of God that knows no bounds?

Can we recognize the importance of telling the story the way we see it? Do we know how vital it is that it not be lost?

You who are the aged wise among us, you have a role in this story like no one else. Because you have grown up with it. It is embedded in your heart. Please help us tell it.

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Help us tell it to our children and theirs. And you who are the young among us, listen to the story as they tell it. Live it, breathe it, and share it.

It is a story of love. It is a story of freedom, freedom to respond, freedom for all. It is a story of compassion. And justice. It is a story on which new life can be built. For all.

Knowing the difference between what is being spoke this morning in many churches and what might be said here in this place about how it is that we are free – not as a price paid for sin but as a call to a higher good-- makes me appreciate this place even more.

We here at AUMC have a story to tell. We have a message to give. It is different, and it is vital.

We know that many gave their lives for our freedom, and we know the story doesn't end there. We know that we are called to respond now, that the pain of war be not in vain; we know that we are called to respond well, extending that freedom to all.

We are free to reach the highest fulfillment in our lives, and to work for that for all. It is not dependent on our outer circumstances, but rather is the call of Truth from within our hearts.

May we hear that call, once again, today as we gather at the Table of love.  
And in the words of Rev. Bill Phipps, "May our gratitude inspire our citizenship."