

Declaring Devotions

Psalm 30, Luke 10. 1-11, 16-20

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A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

July 4 2010

On this day, two hundred and thirty four years ago – on July 4, 1776 -- King George III of England wrote into his diary only a short sentence, these words: “Nothing of importance happened today.”

Meanwhile that same day, across the Atlantic Ocean in Philadelphia, the signers of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed: “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor . . .” with the conviction holding “these truths to be self-evident, that all men(sic, *and women*) 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 . . .” and then concluding the Declaration they announced: “WE, therefore, the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in GENERAL CONGRESS, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES. . . .”

The signers were clear about King George’s oppression and tyranny. As the Declaration goes on to list and articulate their grievances, it reads in a way reminiscent – I think -- of the 95 theses which Martin Luther cited in the Protestant proclamation which rocked the world of the church in 1517, when he nailed those theses to the door of the cathedral in Whittenberg, Germany– the very church where he served as pastor.

Not so coincidentally, about 250 years after Luther at Whittenberg, the protesting voice was evident in the Declaration of Independence. That voice – resonant with the convictions of democracy and self-government – was fueled and schooled by one among the signers who was both a pastor and a professor: Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon. (A bit of history here on this day of history . . .) John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister was the only clergy person – among the 56 signers - to place his signature on the Declaration.

Witherspoon came to Philadelphia as an elected delegate from New Jersey, where he taught Moral Philosophy *at*, and also served as the president *of*, the College of New Jersey (which later became Princeton University). There in Princeton, he was the founder of the Nassau Presbyterian Church.

While teaching at Princeton, among his students: there were 2 who became US president (Madison, Adams), three of whom made it to the US Supreme Court, 10 Cabinet officers, 12 members of the Continental Congress, 28 U.S. senators, and 49 United States congressmen. And when the 2nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America met in 1789 to consider its constitution – which has been a model for the US

Articles of Confederation and the US Constitution . . . Witherspoon was active in drafting both – 52 of the 188 delegates to the Presbyterian Church’s 2nd General Assembly in 1789, 52 of the 188!, had been students of John Witherspoon. When some folks there in Philadelphia in the early summer of 1776 contended that the country was not yet ready for independence, Witherspoon was reputed to have said: “America is not only ripe for the measure, but in danger of rotting for the want of it.”

He was clear, as were his cohorts, about the steps for freedom from England and King George. Make no mistake! (Parenthetically, imagine how Dr. Witherspoon would feel about the most recent Marist College political survey this week; it points out some alarming statistics. On this Independence Day, the Marist survey notes that 26% of all Americans do not know which country America won its independence from! Further, the survey goes on to cite that in the age group of Americans 18 – 29, 33% of them are not sure who we won our freedom from. Interestingly, 7% of those who are not sure think it may have been either Japan, Mexico, China, Spain or France!) In these days of high techno info, we appear to have a great hold on information, but a weak grasp of knowledge. We have strong attraction to celebrity, but fall short on conscience . . .

An example of that skewed sense of things before us finds that in a week – this past week -- in which our country receives the news of 15 Americans without jobs and an employment rate of 9.5% -- a rate which would have been higher, except that 650,000 Americans are no longer looking, as the statistics tell us that right now there are 5 people available for each available job. [At present, any much-needed extension of unemployment benefits, hangs in the balance awaiting the Senate’s vote.] . . . However, yet, there is *one particular job* that the media seems obsessed with: Namely the employment of LeBron James, the 24 year-old multi-millionaire basketball star, heralded as “King James” (Americans seem to have an attraction to royalty). LeBron James is sure to sign a contract shortly which may in fact equal the amount necessary to fund an extension for our fellow unemployed Americans!

In the Gospel this Lord’s Day, we come upon a commission -- -co-mission, a commitment of the growing number of people called by Jesus to be a community, relating, serving, with help for healing, realizing care for those who are “least of all”, reaching out with the love of Jesus . . . proclaiming their freedom in Christ, and their dependence of God’s love . . .

It’s the beginning of the church . . . A faithful gathering. 70 individuals is the number which Luke reports.

The anthropologist Margaret Meade bears witness to that dynamic over time: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed [folks] citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does”

70 is that number associated with the nations of the then- inhabited world. We see that number in the first listing of tribes and nations in Genesis’ 10th chapter. Such a small

number, compared to all of Christendom today! Just as 56 Declaration signers in 1776 sparked a revolution and the birth of a nation, now of 6 billion. Just as that small gathering of 50 souls here in this neighborhood came together – way back in 1914, committed to be the church that we have grown to be . . .

Committed to share and serve, proclaiming our salvation and freedom in Christ, reaching out with that love.

May it be so in us. Amen.

The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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.-- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our Brittish brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent

States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

The 56 signatures on the Declaration appear in the positions indicated:

Column 1

Georgia:

Button Gwinnett
Lyman Hall
George Walton

Column 2

North Carolina:

William Hooper
Joseph Hewes
John Penn

South Carolina:

Edward Rutledge
Thomas Heyward, Jr.
Thomas Lynch, Jr.
Arthur Middleton

Column 3

Massachusetts:

John Hancock

Maryland:

Samuel Chase
William Paca
Thomas Stone
Charles Carroll of Carrollton

Virginia:

George Wythe
Richard Henry Lee
Thomas Jefferson
Benjamin Harrison
Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Francis Lightfoot Lee
Carter Braxton

Column 4

Pennsylvania:

Robert Morris
Benjamin Rush
Benjamin Franklin
John Morton
George Clymer
James Smith
George Taylor
James Wilson
George Ross

Delaware:

Caesar Rodney
George Read
Thomas McKean

Column 5

New York:

William Floyd
Philip Livingston
Francis Lewis
Lewis Morris

New Jersey:

Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Hopkinson
John Hart
Abraham Clark

Column 6

New Hampshire:

Josiah Bartlett
William Whipple

Massachusetts:

Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert Treat Paine
Elbridge Gerry

Rhode Island:

Stephen Hopkins
William Ellery

Connecticut:

Roger Sherman
Samuel Huntington
William Williams
Oliver Wolcott

New Hampshire:

Matthew Thornton