

Independence and the One Body

A sermon preached on Sunday, July 2, 2017, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost,
at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York
by the Associate Rector, The Rev. Richard S. J. Pike

So here we all are. Again. And here we are, with the gift that keeps on giving. A Brit delivering a sermon on Independence Day weekend! Perhaps Pearce Klemmt, our Interim to be, can take over the reins next year, and you can be spared from this annual march-out of your native, but fast-assimilating, Redcoat.

I've been asking around a little this week, asking what I might say. Some wag suggested, "Well, you could start by apologizing!" It seems a little late for that – I'd prefer to stick to my suggestion that I'll spend the Fourth proudly wearing my 2nd place ribbon.

The Fourth, American or not, is a great holiday. As an ex-pat of over 13 years now, living in this remarkable country, the Fourth marks, for me at least, the start of the summer months, when things just slow down a little, and everyone gets away. It's a day to remember the hard-fought and well-won battle for independence – a battle that signified for many a freeing from the chains of tyranny – a new-found independence for the people. A people that had signed up for and fought for a declaration of independence that wonderfully stated that all men are created equal. As an outsider looking in, I am happily often the first to tell anyone who questions this nation that the ideals that this country stands for are truly revolutionary. So, I'm not surprised there's a national holiday every year to celebrate – and now with three American children of my own, I'm very much along for the ride.

We were in Newburgh this week. On our youth mission trip, with six teenagers and young adults – and I was delighted that Bonnie Tisi and Roger Vincent also came along to help shepherd and chaperone our younger parish members as we joined the good folks of Habitat Newburgh and in a very real way helped them as they put the finishing touches to four new houses that will be hopefully be occupied in September.

Now, when talking of Newburgh I am often the first to remind folks that it's the most violent city in the state of New York – and is among the top ten most violent cities in the nation. What I haven't often mentioned, and was reminded of this week, was that George

Washington had his headquarters here towards the end of the Revolutionary War. His headquarters at Newburgh, which was quite near the four houses we were working on, became the nation's first publically-owned historic site. And it was here in 1783 that a number of remarkable happenings took place. Firstly, despite encouragement from certain elements of the army, in Newburgh Washington rejected the idea that he should become king after the war; he created and awarded the Badge of Military Merit, forerunner of the Purple Heart; he quashed the Newburgh conspiracy, an attempted military coup led by disgruntled officers, and, he circulated a letter from these Hudson River headquarters that influenced the writing of the Constitution. Newburgh, then, was a crucial center for the freedom-loving independence movement that initially shaped this nation. And no doubt this coming Tuesday, there will be many celebrations in this troubled, yet inspiring town.

As we spent our time in Newburgh this week, with my mind at times focused on what I might say this Sunday, and working with our children – and seeing the good work the folks at Habitat collectively put together – it struck me that perhaps as we begin to consider the merits of independence this coming Tuesday, we could also take some time to consider the merits of our shared interdependence.

Habitat, an organization set up by the Southern Baptists initially, is a Christian movement that revels in its opportunity to come together and help fellow Americans who may not be quite as fortunate as some of us. George Washington, when quashing the failed military coup, did so by calling upon his fellow soldiers to remember their shared values and commonality with each other – and thereby avoid further bloodshed. And, if I get this wrong by the way tell me so on the way out, but it took 13 colonies coming together, and working together to kick the English out, right? Independence then was won by the formation of a new interdependence between folks who shared common aspirations and a noble goal.

Independent and interdependence. I would suggest we as Christians feel the push and pull of this dynamic each and every day in our own lives. On the one hand we operate in a society and wider world that often values the success of the individual above all other concerns. It's ok to be focused on number one, we are told. We succeed and move forward in life when we put ourselves first. We must be ferociously independent. And yet – and yet, as Christians, we are all members of the One Body, are we not? We are all connected, whether we like it or not, with every other baptized Christian in this world. Be they sitting on the bench next to you this morning, whether they're in another denomination and disagree with you viscerally when it comes to our polluted political life. Or whether

they're refugees in Syria, Iraq or Egypt, fleeing death and violence simply because they follow the same cross of Christ as you do. Whether we like it or not, we are connected together. And Jesus calls us to regularly acknowledge this unavoidable interdependence. The Gospel this morning is all about that – a demand for a Christian welcome for our fellow brothers and sisters, known or unknown. Through Christ we are called into relation, and Jesus sets and expects a high level of kind, compassionate hospitality.

Now, this country has a remarkable social connectivity and national identity. I can attest, as can millions of other travelers into this land, that the American welcome is truly one of the best in the world. And as Christians throughout this land we can play our part in furthering and extending this national characteristic of warm welcome into our local civic life, and we must play our part and continue to be heard in the wider life of this great republic.

A truly independent nation then, full of the sinews of interconnectivity among its people. And we as Christians are all interdependent, called into relation by our Savior Jesus Christ. And the fact we can play our part in moving this faith-led and faith-inspired interdependence forward by sharing and spreading this good news of the Gospel – and we can talk about it without fear or fright – and we can act upon this in a society that allows and engages in such conversation offers more than enough reason to celebrate on this coming Independence Day. And over burgers, hot dogs, cold beer, baseball, and God willing, blue sunny skies, I'll look at my American children this coming Tuesday and know I can join you all, and celebrate the freedom, independence, and interdependence, of this great nation.