
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Sacred Rest

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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♮ God is still speaking,

July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress adopts a resolution severing ties with Great Britain. The formal wording of the formal Declaration of Independence is not approved until July 4. This news of independence is printed on the night of July 4, 1776, by John Dunlap of Philadelphia, and about 200 copies are distributed. Known as Dunlap broadsides, they are large pieces of paper printed on one side and folded in the middle for distribution. 25 are known to still exist today, 21 of which belong to universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

The handwritten Declaration of Independence was created after July 19th, 1776, and signed by most Congressional delegates on August 2.¹

This Declaration of Independence could be likened to the Bible. We think we know what it says. We have heard parts of it before. We remember some of the good parts. We know some familiar passages and we are willing to pull them out anytime the cause seems right. More like the Bible than not, this Declaration of Independence is mostly forgotten, ignored, and only quoted on special holidays.

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another...

They should declare the causes which impel them to the separation...

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies...

It is a case of irreconcilable differences with King George of England...

He has refused

He has forbidden

He has dissolved

He has obstructed

He has imposed

He has deprived

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence

He has taken away

He has suspended

He has abdicated

He has plundered

He has constrained

He has incited

We have petitioned.

We have not been heard.

He is a tyrant, unfit to be a ruler of a free people.

“Resolved, 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, dissolved.”

Be it therefore further resolved, that as of the year 1941, July 4th shall be a paid federal holiday, and Americans shall drive far distances in their cars, should they be able to afford the gas. They shall be outside with fireworks, should there be no excessive heat, storm or fire warnings. And they shall eat multiple quantities of hot dogs, should they not wonder what is in a hot dog, really.

All kidding aside, July 4th is a moment in our secular life when we can express our gratitude for our freedoms and our gratitude for all those who work for freedom. July 4th is also a moment in our sacred life when we express our gratitude to a God who seeks justice, a heaven on earth, a realm of peace. The secular and sacred do meet.

In his book *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, author Chris Hedges brings together the secular and the sacred. Hedges is a seminary graduate and the son of a Presbyterian minister. His career includes being the bureau chief in the Middle East for the New York Times and part of the New York Times team that won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of global terrorism. *I Don't Believe in Atheists* is his thesis that in America today, two extreme 'sides' battle for control in our society. Both sides promote heaven on earth, one from a Biblical fundamentalism and one from a secular fundamentalism. Both promote heaven on earth,

even if they have to kill all the bad people to get it. Hedges says in a gloomy prediction of our future, “There is nothing in human nature or human history to support the idea that we are morally advancing as a species or that we will overcome the flaws of human nature.”²

“Not morally advancing”? All of our technology, all of our knowledge and information and education and we are still ‘not morally advancing’? We celebrate life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, don’t we? For all? For some? For just myself and my happiness?

Frederick Douglass spoke to moral advancement in a speech July 5th, 1852, 76 years after our nation’s independence was declared. Entitled “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro”, Douglass spoke, an orator, a statesman, an abolitionist, a Negro. We see Frederick Douglass in the window, last column on the right, eight squares down from the top. When he gave the speech in 1852, Douglass would have been 44 years old, about 14 years freed from slavery. Born into slavery in this independent nation, he was separated from his mother as an infant and was raised by a grandmother until he was seven. At seven, he was sold and taken to a plantation in Maryland. When his overseer, speculated to be his father, died, he was sold again and he became a slave in Baltimore. Now about twelve, his new master’s wife began to teach him the alphabet, a clear violation of the law for slaves were not to be educated. Soon he was reading everything, as well as teaching other slaves to read and write. He absorbed knowledge quickly and devoured anything that spoke to the issues of freedom and human rights. He was a threat and his master sold him again, this time to a harsh taskmaster. Douglass was whipped and beaten repeatedly, his master trying desperately to break his spirit. After several attempts, he finally escaped, making his way from Maryland to Delaware to the Quaker City, Philadelphia, and on to New York.

In his speech “The meaning of July Fourth for the Negro”, Douglass said that the Fourth of July is the “first great fact” in the nation’s young history...the very ringbolt in the chain of our country’s yet undeveloped destiny.”³

² Christ Hedges, *I Don’t Believe in Atheists*, Simon and Schuster, p. 5.

³ <http://www.historyisaweapon.org/defcon1/douglassjuly4.html>

We may not resonate with the term ‘ringbolt’, but it was a powerful image for Douglass. Surely he knew the ringbolt that held the chains that bound him throughout his life. Surely he knew the ringbolt that bound him to fellow slaves, men, women and children, their collars of iron securing and demoralizing their very being. If only the ringbolt could come loose, they would be free. They could escape. They would know this life and liberty that others celebrated and lived as a matter of course, a matter of skin color.

“Over the round top of your ship of state, dark and threatening clouds may be seen,” Douglass said. “Heavy billows, like mountains in the distance, disclose to the leeward huge forms of flinty rocks! That ringbolt drawn, that chain broken, and all is lost. Cling to this day (the 4th of July) cling to it, and to its principles, with the grasp of a storm-tossed mariner to a spar at midnight.”

Cling to the day, the 4th of July. The 4th of July is our secular call to the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and it is our sacred call to justice, a heaven on earth, a realm of peace. The secular and the sacred do indeed meet.

If you listened carefully, you heard it also in the Gospel reading from Matthew. It does not really sound like good news as the disciples of John the Baptizer and the disciples of Jesus seem to be fighting, fundamentalists perhaps, willing to save the world each of them, even if they have to kill all the bad people to do it? “Woe to you Chorazim! You aren’t doing what Jesus taught. Woe to you Bethsaida! You are supposed to be happy and you look like you are marching to a funeral.”

What could you expect really? The people were not unlike what Frederick Douglass described: enslaved, discouraged, a storm billowing off in the distance. They knew slavery, not just their ancestors, but now with this Roman government which denied them life, and liberty, gave them little happiness and even less peace.

They had felt peace when Jesus spoke. They had felt their hearts stir with hope. This Jesus was not one who came to pile on more laws. When they had listened to Jesus, when they had watched him bring healing, somehow God was no longer ‘other’. In a new way, God was

‘with them’. God was breaking bread. God was energy and love. God was center and connection, living, presence, enveloping, strength. God was not up there. God was walking beside and sitting down. God was companion. And they told the story. They wrote it down for others to know. They sought to remember. “When in the course of human events...” We hold these truths to be self-evident. God is for me a ringbolt. God breaks the chains of injustice and God will be for me a chain of prayer and a chain of compassion. God is a chain of a people held together in community, people that care for and about one another.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: God is for me a yoke, a yoke that lightens my burden because it is shared. The experienced one is yoked with the inexperienced. The energized one is shared with the one who struggles to keep on going. The one who is lost is steered back onto the path. Journeying together means strength builds on strength. Yoked, we travel from grace to grace.

This 4th of July, as the secular and the sacred meet, I am convicted that Jesus did not come nor live as a fundamentalist who proclaimed The Way. Rather I come and seek to live my life, both secular and sacred, and fully grateful that Jesus showed me A Way, to justice, A Way to a heaven on earth, A Way to a realm of peace. Amen.