



“Independence and Interdependence”
Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:4-13
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, July 2, 2017

The church in Corinth was having issues. Paul had brought the gospel to this prosperous and boisterous seaport in southern Greece less than 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He had helped to establish this band of believers, but now he was across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus.

Word reached him that there was dissension among the ranks, so he wrote this letter in hopes of reestablishing the bonds among this fragmenting community. Members were becoming testy with each other and breaking into factions over ethical issues and spiritual gifts. But I wonder if one of the underlying problems was that the congregation was so diverse. The congregation was comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. That distinction alone could have prompted problems as it did in the Galatian church. Jewish Christians could have felt that they had been God’s chosen all along, and Gentiles were the new kids on the block. A feeling of superiority and “We will show you how it’s done” attitude could have created frosty relations. But the distinctions did not stop there. The members were from different social strata. The church included the wealthy and the poor, people who were free and those who were slaves.

If we skim this letter, we see that in earlier chapters, Paul addressed questions of sexual ethics, lawsuits, eating food that had been offered to idols, and greed. In the twelfth chapter he hones in on spiritual gifts. A hierarchy had developed because some boasted that their spiritual gift was superior to others. Conflict ensued and divisions arose as some tried to pump up their self-importance by claiming the gifts of the other were inferior. I suspect they were sending out insulting tweets.

Paul writes, “I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, “Let Jesus be cursed!” That sounds like a peculiar accusation to level at a Christian congregation. No one would be cursing Jesus.

But what Paul is driving at, is that creating a hierarchy of spiritual gifts, where some believe they are better than others, would be anathema to Jesus. It would be tantamount to cursing everything Jesus stood for. Keep in mind that in the very next chapter – 1 Corinthians 13, the verses you often hear at weddings – Paul will declare that no spiritual gift amounts to anything if love is not the primary driving force.

In today’s reading, Paul acknowledges that not everyone has the same spiritual gifts. There are a variety of gifts – among them are wisdom, faith, healing, and prophecy. But these different gifts must never be placed in a pecking order. Different gifts are not given to benefit some at the expense of others, but rather, Paul says, they are intended to be used for the common good.

Paul was focused on holding together a community of faith that was in danger of splintering. He reminded them that their differences were not reasons for dividing into separate factions, but rather for *enriching* the Body of Christ. Paul faced a similar problem in the church he had established in Galatia. They, too, were dangerously close to fracturing their congregation by separating into competing groups. He called on them not to let their differences divide them, but instead to harness them – in his words – “to work for the good of all.”¹

In two days, we will celebrate Independence Day. We will celebrate it at a time when there are stark divisions and competing factions in our nation. And I cannot help but think that Paul’s advice long ago to those divided churches might help our country today.

Where Paul called on the Corinthians to work for the “common good” and the Galatians to work for the “good of all,” our nation’s founders included in the preamble to the Constitution that it was intended to “promote the general welfare” and they adopted the motto: E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many, One.

The founders were not starry-eyed dreamers who thought all of the citizens of our nation would sing off of the same page. They recognized the diversity of our country. Yet, they also knew that if we do not have certain bonds that tie us together, and if we do not adhere to our system of government that respects individual rights and protects minorities, and if we do not truly desire justice for everyone, but only a select few, we will not survive as a nation.

We live in troubling times. The rancor and divisiveness is not as bad as it was in the sixties – neither the 1860s nor the 1960s – but it feels as if we are continuing to spiral downward. I am attracted to the idea of author Parker Palmer who says that in addition to celebrating Independence Day, we should add an annual Interdependence Day. This day “would remind us of something we seem to be in danger of forgetting: ‘We’re all in this together!’”²

These days we have more ways to connect with each other than ever – phones in our pockets, email, texting, and social media – yet our society may be more fragmented than ever. Neighborhoods used to be places where everyone knew everyone else on the block. Today, someone two doors away can die and you may not know about it for weeks. Such seclusion breeds fierce independence. Not independence in terms of being free from the control of government and having the guarantee of civil liberties, but independence in terms of isolation from others. Such isolation encourages people to become more and more concerned about their individual rights – the freedom to do as I please – and less about the repercussions of our actions. Isolation diminishes a person’s desire to enhance the common good.

But, we take a step away from self-centered independence and isolation, by being part of a loving church family. In church, we embrace a robust interdependence, where we care about each other and support each other. When we face the storms of life, we do not face them alone. Others are there with their physical presence and their prayers. When we celebrate the joys of life, it is not a one-person party. Others are there to heighten the satisfaction.

I hope you find that church friends are less likely than others to become jealous when something good happens to you. I hope you find that brothers and sisters in Christ are less likely to snatch away the spotlight when it rightly shines on you. The church stands as an alternative to the creeping isolationism and the decline of community.

However, these are not the only reasons that people are not motivated to enhance the common good these days. It is also the bitter political divide that has devolved into a shouting match where each side’s fundamental position is “We’re right and you’re wrong!” and facts are invented willy-nilly to support one’s opinion.

The lack of civility and disregard for the truth are a recipe for disaster. For our democracy to work and for our nation to thrive, we must respect others – those who are different and those with whom we disagree – and we must honor the truth and expose dishonesty.

To reduce the polarization, we can begin by acknowledging that not everyone who holds a contrary opinion is either an idiot or evil. Perhaps each of us could confess that we are not right one hundred percent of the time. Perhaps a dose of humility might help us entertain the possibility that we could be wrong. Or, if not wrong, at least not entirely right. We may not have all the relevant information and we may be blind to the down side of our position.

And perhaps we should become more modest in drawing conclusions about the motivations of others. Are we certain we know what is motivating the other person? A basic understanding of human psychology reminds us that we do not always know our *own* motivations; so, how can we be so sure about the motives of others?

There is more name-calling and degradation of others than I can ever remember. Perhaps we could lessen the divide if each of us would set a goal of abandoning crude and vulgar responses, and consciously strive to elevate the conversation.

I am not saying that people should cave-in to others or relinquish the courage of their convictions, but if we are going to enhance the common good, we will need to do more than simply shout at the other side.

Francis Kissling is a pro-choice advocate who for many years was the head of Catholics for Choice. Her “reputation for being devastating in debate is legendary. She loves a good fight, and she loves to win. But over the years, she has become convinced of the need to approach those with whom she disagrees positively and with enthusiasm for differences. She has come to the conclusion that the saying our mother taught us was spot on: you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”³ The Apostle Paul said it this way, “If we do not have love, we are nothing.” The congregation in Corinth existed under the oppressive Roman Empire where citizen’s rights were restricted. Their focus was limited to their congregation where they were to work with one another for the common good and to establish unity in the midst of their diversity.

In 21st Century North America, we live in a very different situation. We have not only the responsibility for our church, but also our country.

Our founders sought independence from tyranny. They created a system of checks and balances by establishing three branches of government. They established laws that guaranteed freedom of expression. Citizens can speak their minds freely and protest peacefully, the media can and must keep an eye on the government, and all can choose to worship or not as they see fit.

Our founders created laws that provide equal protection of the rights of all and protect minorities from the majority. We have the freedom to travel without restrictions and the right to privacy, the right to vote, and the right to run for elected office.

Most are familiar with their rights, but many forget we also have certain responsibilities, including obeying the law, respecting the rights of those who think differently than we do, and committing ourselves to the words of the Pledge of Allegiance: “One nation, under God, with liberty and justice for *whom*? All! Liberty and justice for Native Americans, European Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans.

One of the underlying tensions that creates a great deal of divisiveness is the worldview that drives us. On the one hand there is survival of the fittest. Life is a competition where winners secure the goods and losers are vanquished. Its pillars go by the names of selfishness, greed, and domination of others.

The alternative view is the recognition that God's creation is based on interdependence and our lives are more enriched when we work for the good of all. Its pillars are compassion, justice, and respect of others.

As we celebrate Independence Day at this divisive juncture in our nation's history, may each of us pledge to do what we can to heal our country by doing the difficult "work of listening and learning and finding common ground for the common good."⁴

NOTES

1. Galatians 6:10.
2. Parker J. Palmer, *onbeing.org*, July 2, 2014.
3. Frances Kissling, "The Good in the Other, The Doubt in Ourselves," *onbeing.org*, July 11, 2016
4. This phrase comes from a statement by interfaith leaders in Boston who launched the online campaign: #DeclareInterdependence.

Prayers of the People ~ Independence Day

Eternal God, the Author of life and liberty, we turn to you to understand the proper place our nation is to have in our loyalties. Grant us wisdom and strength to serve you and this nation faithfully in the days that lie ahead.

Remind us of our duty to promote the general welfare, to secure the blessings of liberty for all, to see to it that justice and compassion reign from sea to shining sea, and that the bountiful resources of our land are not only thankfully received, but also generously shared with the whole human family.

Gracious God, if we are to be a light to other nations, show us what our nation must continue to become. Show us ways to unbind the chains which still limit the freedom of too many people. Enable us to win the fight against poverty which enslaves many in our country and around the world. Encourage us to overcome any prejudice based on race, sexual orientation or religion.

God, we know that liberty is a precious gift that allows us to freely choose the path of Christ. May we never take freedom for granted and may we always be ready to work for the common good.

Loving God, we are very blessed to live in a land of liberty, help us to use our freedom to speak the truth, to promote justice for all and to respond with love toward our neighbor. These are the principles on which Jesus built his ministry, and these are the virtues you call us to embody. Amen.