

Our Day of Blessed Independence

Although I do not own my own vuvuzela, I am a self-proclaimed World Cup fanatic. My rabid fanhood came to a climax in spectacular fashion just a couple of weeks ago. When Team USA was playing Algeria, four years of patriotism, of waiting, of anticipation, of pure delight in the beautiful game was all coming to a head. In the midst of the match, I truly believed that the United States was going to be eliminated from yet another World Cup without winning a single game. But then lightning struck – we scored a stupendous goal in the final minutes, snatching a miraculous win from the jaws of a cynical tie.

I exploded. Rucous chants of “USA!” could be heard up and down my street as I waved an American flag from my second story balcony. Totally overcome by a wondrous mix of patriotism and pride in my country’s athletes, I acted like a total fool. I’m sure that my new neighbors must think that I am quite literally, out of mind.

But this manifestation of my patriotism really wasn’t that odd. People at the Republican and Democratic national conventions are often seen with silly straw hats emblazoned with red, white, and blue ribbons. And there’s a fair chance that many of us will sit at a picnic table today, eating hot dogs and drinking lemonade, as if those items somehow honored our nation’s Independence Day. And just how do giant explosions in the night sky cause us to remember the signing of the Declaration of Independence? Patriotism, pride, and boasting in one’s country is always fun, but often silly-looking from the outside.

In all seriousness, it is on days like these, the fourth of July, that Americans from shore to shore take time to reflect, and to give thanks for this broad and good land of ours: for our open and free society, for the rights and privileges that cannot be found anywhere else on the globe, and simply for the honor of being an “American.”

But it is also on days like these, Sunday that is, that we need to stop and reflect on another type of independence day. From the outside, our Sunday celebrations probably look a little silly too. People of all manner of races and ages gather in everything from large halls to small churches to open spaces to celebrate a man who died and came back to life. Then, after singing our hearts out and listening to a book that is almost two thousand years old, we claim to eat and drink the flesh and blood of this once dead, now raised man.

My neighbors at home probably still think that I'm sort of crazed lunatic for my exuberant flag-waving and chanting; but hey, I was proud of my country and I wanted to show it. Our non-Christian neighbors must look at us and think that we are at best wrong-headed, and at worst, wishful cannibals; but hey, we know that Sunday is more than that.

Christians from east to west, from south to north gather on this day to remember and celebrate the most important event in the history of God's creation. It was on this day, a Sunday, that the crucified Lord burst the bonds of death and rolled away the stone of his tomb. Coupled with the crucifixion on the previous Friday, the day of resurrection gives meaning and hope for our lives and for the life of the world. Our faith is entrusted to the God who promises to raise us also from our own tombs of death and despair. Because of Sunday, we are freed not from the tyranny of some monarch of old, but from the very kingdom of sin and death. This is our day of independence, and this is why we gather to remember and celebrate.

Paul says many of the same things in his letter to the Galatians. He proclaims that he can only boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. For Paul, nothing else really matters. It is the cross of Jesus Christ, by which humanity is reacquisitioned and reconciled with God, that has any import in the world. The event of the crucifixion and the subsequent resurrection is what gives us our independence from sin and death.

It is as if Jesus Christ himself stood at our Liberty Tree, the cross. He confronted the kingdom of death to its face and proclaimed, "No damnation without reconciliation!" With

divine presence and courage, he allowed himself to be crucified, signing our declaration of independence with those final words, “It is finished.”

This is what Paul is boasting about. We boast too; we show up to church on Sundays and praise this God of love. We pray, giving thanks for our independence and asking God to free those who are still bound by the kingdom of death. We carry out acts of charity and love toward our neighbor, as if we were throwing tea into Boston Harbor in defiance of the kingdom of hate. The Christian life, our words and actions that dictate our relationship with God and our neighbors, is the boasting of Paul. It is the independence that has been given by God.

So what does this independence look like? Does our freedom mean that we can live our lives as though we are true libertines, without any moral principles? Now that we are no longer under the dominion of the tyrannical king of sin, can we live without a ruler of our lives? As Paul would say: “By no means!”

After the founding fathers of this great land had thrown off the colonial yoke and the weight of the British Empire, they went about creating new rules that would govern themselves and their progeny. We were given the freedom of the Declaration of Independence, but the new Americans and their government were also constrained by the Constitution. Citizens still had to pay taxes to a government and were bound by the laws of the land.

The same goes for our Christian life. We were redeemed and reconciled on that first Easter Sunday. But that does not give us absolute freedom to live any kind of life we want. Rather, independence in the kingdom of God is bound by the virtues of humility, faith, love, and hope. This is the “new creation” that Paul speaks about. For him, this new creation is “everything,” nothing else matters. To live in this new creation, redeemed Christians, you and I, have to pattern our lives in the Christian faith, . We were not given liberty to do whatever we pleased on any whim. Instead, we were given liberty to bind ourselves unto the faith. It is as if

God penned our Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the laws of the land in one broad stroke of the pen. We are free *from* sin, not free *to* sin.

Today, I would imagine that many of you will celebrate our country's independence. You might wear red, white, and blue. A hot dog and some potato salad might be waiting for you at home. Your plans for watching the fireworks have been made with the family and friends. Chances are, you might catch yourself humming some patriotic tune. These are good things, remember and celebrate our good and broad land; even though we didn't make it any farther in the World Cup.

But before you do any of this, celebrate and remember your **true** independence. Before you don your red, white, and blue, clothe yourselves with the Holy Spirit. Before you go to the picnic to eat that hot dog and drink that sweet tea, come to this table and eat this bread, and drink this wine. And before you "ooh" and "ahh" at the fireworks in the night sky, be amazed at the One who has created that sky. Before you go out and hum "The Star Spangled Banner," pick up that hymnal in front of you, and lift your voices in praise to the one who has set you free.

My friends, don't just have a "Happy Fourth of July." Celebrate a blessed day of independence.