

“Independence”

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Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA

Luke 4:16-29

Coming off of our nation’s Independence Day prompts a question surrounding the meaning of “independence.” Not just national independence, but even personal independence. What does it look like? I remember as a child my mother taking my sister and me to a fireworks celebration at a nearby lake, where we grew up in Oklahoma. We were very young, and what stands out in my mind most from this moment of festivities were two things. The first being, no doubt the sheer excitement that any child would have who’s about to witness a major fireworks show. The other thing that stood out in my mind was meeting of two young twins about the same age as my sister and I, a boy and a girl, who had a condition in which their skin lacked pigmentation. They were both born with albinism. It was the first time we had met twins that I could remember and the first time we had met anyone with such a condition of albinism and I remember struggling to understand it. My mother briefly whispered in my ear “they’re albinos” as if it would now suddenly make sense. For me, the word conjured a mental picture of “rhinos” and that just couldn’t be correct. But we carried on playing together. Both of the kids wore special sun glasses and their skin was pasty white like I’d never seen before. It was after dusk and they seemed to be in their element. They explained to my sister and me that they didn’t really go out during the day, and so reveled in the cool of the evening—when the sun was hidden away. When their bodies thrived rather than suffered. It was ironic as I think back on this moment of skin color, how on Independence Day these two new playmates relished their personal freedom or “independence” by being able to enjoy the celebrations because it was night. Lastly, I remember being sleepy as the exciting fireworks began, and I remember how the two other kids seemed to never want to sleep or get tired even, laughing and dancing well into the late-night celebrations. I envied them. They were free.

Our nation was formed out of rebellion from its own oppressors, while ironically this new nation was simultaneously oppressing others. And in many ways, it still maintains a system that has continued to do just that, oppress vulnerable people groups. It is a lot like trying to put toothpaste back in the tube as we struggle as a nation to reconcile our oppressive past with “band-aid” fixes, which never truly seem to fix the system. I, however, am under another persuasion when it comes to a path forward. I feel the system must be corrected, of course, but I also think that until our hearts are truly transformed and our racist tendencies rooted out completely, the band-aid fixes will not do the trick. We must change.

Jesus’ Gospel message, which we just read in Luke 4, lays out a path forward that is not centered on “majority culture” of which Jesus was clearly a member. He put aside the empowered people group from which he hailed to focus on the oppressed ones all around him, and when he explained to his own people that God had called him to do this very thing, they were enraged. He even cited past precedent: The prophet Elijah feeding a foreign widow and her son rather than his own people during famine and later Elisha healing a foreigner rather than those of his own race, as a way of saying it is time to focus on those who are truly “oppressed” and in need, rather than simply perpetuating selfish tribalism. We, and our own people, are NOT the center of God’s universe. We are all God’s children. It is time to look around for those who have been hurt by the system and finding sacrificial ways to help. Jesus said he

would “preach the good news” to the poor, but we know from the stories, that when Jesus said “preach the good news” or from the Greek “evangelize” he meant much more than simply speaking. He meant feeding and clothing, sleeping outside with and commiserating with those who are suffering from poverty, and truly sacrificing with them. When someone asked to follow him, Jesus said of his state of things, “The foxes have holes, the birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head.” In other words, Jesus was homeless.

Jesus said he would proclaim freedom for the captives, healing of the blind and release for the oppressed. And again, we know, Jesus did more than simply say these things. He healed the sick, both physically and mentally. He brought relief to them over and over when no one else would. Ironically, when he did heal his own people, they weren’t always as grateful as those of other races were, as he points out in the healing of the 10 lepers, when the only one to return and thank him was a Samaritan. But it was the marginalized of society that understood the compassion of Jesus and loved him for it. While those of his own people, the religious leaders of his day, condemned him. And Jesus did more than just say “you’re free” to those being oppressed. When foreign worshippers were being taken advantage of by the Money Changers of his own people at the Temple, Jesus flipped over their tables in outrage and declared “My father’s house is to be a house of prayer for ALL nations!” Jesus lived out his this freedom for others with his own body, giving it up in order to stay true to the hope that all of us should live not just for ourselves but for one another. He said, “no greater love has a person for another than except when their life down for them.”

So how do we do it? How do we truly live into the freedom of others? Well, like I learned long ago as a child at a firework show—loving others requires

- 1) listening of their experiences without judgment (you have no idea what they’ve gone through)
- 2) don’t fall asleep when they need you to be awake with them
- 3) join in side by side, living into their experience, embodying their pain and joy with them as much as is possible
- 4) work to create conditions within your control to enable truly equitable freedom for all

This is us living out the Gospel that Jesus spoke about: Independence from oppression.

Shalom