

“Set Free!”

Independence Day – the Fourth of July is celebrated because of the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War, which resulted from its adoption. Since this is Freedom Sunday, let’s begin with the second and third sentences of the Declaration of Independence, which state, **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”**

After reciting a long list of “abuses and usurpations”, the Declaration reveals, **“In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.”** I trust everyone noticed in those quotes from the Declaration of Independence, there was the emphasis on **the equality of all people and the need to overcome oppression.**

The Scripture Reading today also lifts up equality and the defeating of oppression. According to the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus understood an important aspect of his Identity and Purpose was to fulfill God’s Promises as reported in what Biblical Scholars refer to as the Third Isaiah portion of the Book of Isaiah. Those words come from the time when the Jews were about to leave their exile in Babylon to return to Jerusalem. Since Jesus, evidently, perceived this Text to be a powerful expression of his Call or Purpose from God, he timed his return to his hometown synagogue, so the scroll he would be handed to recite – the scheduled Reading for that Sabbath would include these words, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save His people.”***

This Freedom Sunday, we are going to focus on Jesus’ self-understanding that he came, in part, ***“to set free the oppressed”***. Please notice, the Scripture does not just say God’s Person was to set free only certain deserving folks from their oppression but ***“to set free the oppressed”***. One might wonder why the claim is made that Jesus understood setting ***“free the oppressed”*** was part of his calling. Fortunately, Jesus made this clear for after Reading those words, he sat down and declared, ***“This passage of Scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.”***

Since Jesus declared he is the one who fulfills God’s Promises in the Scripture, which he read that day in the synagogue in Nazareth, we, who believe in him and follow him as our Lord and Savior and the Son of God, are to seek to work for the ultimate fulfillment of his task ***“to set free the oppressed”***. Indeed, I submit, many of the leaders of the American Revolution understood it was also part of their Christian calling to work for the freeing of the oppressed.

The Preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America begins, ***“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”*** “To form a more perfect Union, establish Justice” allude to the Christian calling of ***“setting free the oppressed”***.

Unfortunately, we human beings are not perfect and neither was the fruit of their authorship – the Constitution! That may come across as heretical to some in our society but the truth is it is a living document, which is evolving. For example, the Constitution not only makes provisions for amendments to be made but there actually have been a significant number of Amendments made to the Constitution. Further, some of the Amendments were adopted rather quickly. **The Constitution was approved by the States on September 25, 1789. The first Ten Amendments – the Bill of Rights were approved by the States on December 15, 1791.** Furthermore, slavery was sanctioned in the Constitution and many compromises were made in its drafting. One such compromise was the Three-Fifths Compromise, which counted slaves as three-fifths of a person for the distribution of taxes and representation in the House of Representatives.

The original Constitution did not free the oppressed when it came to a person being enslaved or to limiting the voting and other civil rights to male property owners – especially those with wealth. It is interesting to note that some states originally allowed women to vote but that was quickly overturned by the men in the State legislatures. Unfortunately, that type of pattern was repeated frequently in the history of the United States. For example, although President Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment granted all rights to the

former slaves, the rich and powerful adopted laws and practices to undermine the rights of the former slaves and their descendants, as well as, those of women, the poor, and persons engaged in same sex relationships. Of course, from time to time, overt violence and intimidation has also been used to oppress people of color, women, and persons with a non-straight sexual orientation.

At times Amendments to the Constitution have helped to free some who were oppressed, such as the Nineteenth Amendment granting the Right to Vote to Women. Congress has also passed laws to protect the rights of oppressed individuals, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Some of those laws and constitutional amendments work to eliminate discriminatory practices, such as the poll tax, literacy tests, and voter registration and polling practices intended to suppress the voting of persons from oppressed groups. Unfortunately, more recently, the Supreme Court has overturned portions of such laws with the claim those protections are no longer needed, even though super majorities of Congress renewed the Voting Rights Act and documented the overwhelming evidence of the need of those protections. Additionally, the Supreme Court recently overturned campaign finance laws, which were passed to limit the moneyed influence of the rich and powerful in elections.

We have also recently witnessed evidence from across the nation of some significant law enforcement discriminatory practices, which even result in the death of unarmed persons of color and even of children. **Overt acts of racism seem to be on the rise, such as the murder of nine African American church members in Charleston, South Carolina, and a number of arson suspected burning of black churches in the South.**

Fortunately, in the last few decades, there have been significant instances in which progress has been made in the freeing of the oppressed. For example, interracial couples were granted the right to marry by the Supreme Court. State laws against sexual activity by same sex individuals was also struck down by the Supreme Court. And yes, a little over a week ago, the Supreme Court ruled that same sex marriages are now legal in all 50 states. Marriage Equality is the new reality in the United States of America!

Unfortunately, Texas, as well as some other southern states, are trying to nullify the Law of the Land as they did when the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the Separate but Equal laws intended to preserve racial segregation. The latest version of such actions is to pretend marriage licenses don't have be issued immediately for same sex marriages or government employees have the right to not do their jobs because of their personal religious beliefs or to falsely claim the Supreme Court decision will force religious institutions and their clergy to perform same sex marriage ceremonies against their religious beliefs. **This Ruling does not take away the right of religious institutions and their clergy to follow their religious beliefs, just as previous rulings that divorced persons and mixed race couples have the right to marry has not required a single church or religious institution to participate in a wedding ceremony, which goes against their religious beliefs.**

Expecting the Supreme Court Decision, I discussed some of the implications of the Supreme Court Ruling with the Board of Trustees. **Following Jesus' example of not rejecting anyone, Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, welcomes all people with extravagant hospitality and love. Since the Supreme Court ruling makes same sex marriages legal throughout the United States, we welcome the opportunity to have same sex marriage ceremonies in our facilities, just as we welcome opposite sex marriage ceremonies. The Board of Deacons unanimously supports this policy, which was unanimously adopted by the Board of Trustees.** Further, I as your Pastor will welcome the opportunity to perform same sex marriage ceremonies, just as I welcome opposite sex marriage ceremonies.

In addition to the oppression, which has been experienced by women, persons of color, and LGBT persons, **it is also unjust – oppressive that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons are not given civil right protections against other forms of discrimination,** such as being fired or denied housing or denied loans, etc. because of their sexuality.

Jesus came, in part, **“to set free the oppressed”!** As believers, members of the Body of Christ – the Church, we are to follow Jesus – to also work “to set free the oppressed”! Both as a community of believers and in our individual daily lives, let us work and support the freeing of all people from their oppression. You and I can do that by the way we love and respect everyone we meet. You and I can also carry forth this task through our advocacy to our elected officials and in our personal political discussions and activities. **Yes, let's follow Jesus and his calling “to set free the oppressed”!** Amen.