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Galatians 6:1-16

Here we are, 234 years after our nation declared independence from Great Britain, in the midst of a very difficult time. A time when our economy has tanked, because of greed and overstepping our bounds. People are out of work. People have lost and are losing their homes. People are taking jobs they would never have thought they would take before. People are struggling. People are worried.

We hear that things are getting better, but that's hard to see sometimes.

What will America become next, after this Great Recession is over?

I think our values will change in some way. The Great Recession, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and perhaps to some lesser extent, the oil spill in the Gulf, too, are showing the soft underbelly of our country – the ways we are susceptible even despite our great strengths.

And one of our strengths is independence. Let me read you some of the most beautiful words in the English language:

“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.”

Those words set the foundation of who we would be as the United States of America: freedom, equality, created by God, life, liberty, happiness.

We are a country that takes individuals seriously – that doesn't try to lump its people into one big blurry mass. I've always liked the metaphor of the U.S. as a great salad bowl of people, rather than a melting pot!

We treasure the experience and preciousness of individuals: whether it's a 20 year old who died in Iraq and is brought home with full military honors, or a young Muslim woman who is allowed to wear her headscarf wherever she wants to, or a crazy protester who is allowed to stand on a box across from the White House and shout to anyone who walks by, or for houses of worship, who are allowed to say and do the things we feel God calling us to do without any interference from our government.

But... how is the freedom of the Declaration of Independence like and different from the freedom we have through Jesus Christ, which Paul spend the whole letter to the Galatians talking about? We heard the end of that letter in today's epistle reading.

I want to tell you a little bit about that letter.

There were some traveling preachers coming through the churches of Galatia, who proclaimed that to truly be a disciple of Jesus, you had to perform certain actions, most notably – and painfully! – becoming circumcised.

The first Christians were Jews, because Jesus was a Jew.

And so, some early Christians couldn't help but believe that being Christian meant you also had to practice Jewish religious traditions, because that's what Jesus did.

Paul was a Jew, too, but he knew that wouldn't work. He'd been traveling among Gentiles and seeing how they were drawn to Jesus Christ, and he couldn't see how becoming circumcised or keeping kosher made a difference to their lives of faith. Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that it was faith in Jesus that was the true mark of a Christian, and not circumcision.

Faith meant freedom in Christ – freedom to live a life based on things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and self-control (things Paul called “fruits of the Spirit” [Gal. 5:22-23]) rather than cultural identity, or certain rules that had to do with the outside of your body rather than the inside.

And in many ways, that's true of the Declaration of Independence, too:

“All men are created equal.”

Of course, we could point to a different understanding in 1776: that sentence didn't exactly include women, black men, Indians, indentured servants, and even Anglo men who didn't own land.

But over time, Americans have come to believe that that's what the Declaration means.

We are all created equal by God and God gives us all certain rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We tend to be a nation of individuals, in that way.

But is this what Paul means when he talks about Christian freedom?

Paul and Jesus don't talk much about our rights as individuals. They talk about grace, about responsibilities, about love, about salvation, and about how we are to live together and care for one another.

And so, the words from Paul we heard today remind me more of a Declaration of *Interdependence*. He's told the Galatians that they're free but he also tells them that they're responsible to one another.

They are to bear one another's burdens (and yet they are also to carry their own loads - an interesting but probably very important paradox!), they are to work for the good of all, they are to forgive one another, they are to live together in the Spirit.

We are Christians and we are individuals, but we are also interdependent with one another. Our faith lives depend on being in community with other Christians.

Now living as a faith community and living as a nation-state aren't the same thing.

I'm not saying we can't admire the Declaration of Independence – I sure do!

Treasuring the individual was something new among human governments and one of the greatest gifts of the Declaration and our Constitution.

And yet it's something Judaism and Christianity have said all along – we are loved and called, judged and forgiven by God as individuals as well as as a community.

But like Jews and Christians, Americans are interdependent, too. We share this land, we share communities, economies, roads, schools, flu epidemics, and the well-being of our nation. If we only live as independent individuals, concerned only with our own right to life, liberty, and happiness, we're in trouble!

Are independence and interdependence opposed to each other?

I wonder if the opposite of community might be liberty? Community can't help but detract from liberty and independence; community means we're tied to a group of other people.

And I wonder if the opposite of individual rights is relationships, and all the ambiguities and obligations we feel to the people we love and care for?

As the Great Recession and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan change us as a country, I hope we don't all get scared and turn to self-protection and isolation. I hope that Independence and rugged individualism won't lead us down the wrong path.

Paul and Jesus so often remind us that our happiness and livelihood is about loving our neighbor as ourselves, about caring for the widow and orphan, and about living as a member of a whole Body, and not as a separate hand, eye, ear, or foot.

Rugged individualism can get a little lonely and self-centered. And I'm not sure we can have life, liberty and happiness, truly, that doesn't depend in some way on the lives, liberty, and happiness of our neighbors.

That doesn't mean we can't be both Christians and patriots, but what if we consider American values of freedom, rights, and individual liberties through the lenses of our Christian values, as Paul describes them: love, generosity, patience, self-control, joy, kindness, and faithfulness.

Bear one another's burdens, carry your own loads, work for the good of all, forgive one another with gentleness, reap what you sow, live in the Spirit, do not grow weary, never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May God lead us to true prosperity. True life, true liberty, true happiness, that we may truly be the *United States of America* and move forward into our future as a community of people dedicated to freedom but also dedicated to be in this together, in all our differences and yet with all that we share as Americans.

God bless America.

Amen.