

“OPPORTUNITIES ALONG THE JOURNEY” (7/4/10)

SCRIPTURES: Galatians 6: 1-10 & Mark 16: 1-8

KEY CONCEPTS: Reflections on Independence & our opportunities for freedom in Christ

OPENING READING/PRAYER: (Modified from the Book of Common Prayer, “For the Nation”, 258)

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom & in peace: Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice & the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will...Place within each of us – as citizens of these United States – integrity & a moral compass that point toward equality & justice for all people. And may we seek out opportunities to build upon our country’s rich heritage of religious tolerance & its great diversity as we celebrate our 234th birthday as a nation. In Your Name We Pray, Amen.

OPENING QUOTE (From the Declaration of Independence):

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another & to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate & equal station to which the laws of nature & of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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 & 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 to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it & to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles & organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness...Men who were from Georgia who signed the Declaration of Independence: Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall, George Walton.

(From: <http://holidays.kaboose.com/july-4/declaration-of-independence/july4-decl.html>)

JULY 4TH HISTORY/BACKGROUND: (Online)

Happy Birthday, America! Today as we gather together & maybe grill out this afternoon, it might be hard to imagine what it was like when those backwater colonists came together to draft a breakup letter to be delivered to one of the greatest world powers in 1776.

The delegates of the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 & it quickly became apparent that they were moving toward a new system of government, free of British rule. Ironically, not everyone at the meeting was set on becoming an independent country. Experts estimate that 25% of colonists were loyal to Britain; 25% of colonists were revolutionaries & the remaining 50% vacillated between the two.

The writing of the Declaration of Independence was to help unite the colonists for the common goal of throwing off the tyranny & despotism of King George III, once & for all. Ben Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman & Robert Livingston became the committee that would write this new document. These brilliant minds decided to put the writing duties in Jefferson's capable hands. To fulfill this responsibility, he locked himself in a room for two weeks to craft the earth-shattering document. After much debate, the members of the Continental Congress tentatively approved a version on July 2nd and then took two more days to adopt the final version unanimously.

Much like our modern Fourth of July traditions, colonists enjoyed fireworks and even barbecues (though they didn't call it that back then). They had fireworks to celebrate important dates, so the fireworks tradition began almost immediately. Ironically, many of our Fourth of July tradition's come from Britain's holiday that celebrates the King's Birthday (observed in late June). Another American History fact: .Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on July 4, 1826, on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. (From: <http://news.holidash.com/2010/07/01/first-fourth-of-july/?flv=1>)

TRANSITION:

Therefore, on this our country's 234th birthday, what might we learn as citizens of these United States AND as citizens of the family of God? What are some of our opportunities along this spiritual journey we call life? As we pursue life, liberty & happiness what does today's Scriptures say to us as Christians?

GOSPEL READING – MARK 16: 1- 8:

Today's Gospel reading is the final verses of the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark. This book was also the earliest canonized Gospel. This original text concluded with the women finding an empty tomb, seeing an angel who told them Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead. AND this text departs from the other later Gospels (Matthew, Luke & John) in that the women ***“went out & fled from the tomb, for terror & amazement had seized them; & they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*** (v. 8)

Exegetically, there is much debate regarding the final chapter of the book of Mark. 3 basic options cover the reality of Mark, chapter 16.

- Most ancient authorities state that the book ends with verse 8...“for they were afraid.”
- Some have “a shorter ending” with one additional verse – a commission verse + verses 9-20.
- Some have a longer version with the above mentioned 20 verses PLUS verbiage about an age of lawlessness, Satan, sin, death & Christ. Most scholars agree that the longer version was written in the early 2nd century & appended to the Gospel in the later 2nd century – with verses 9-20 being clearly different in style & understanding of Jesus. (From: Oxford Annotated, 3rd edition, NT 90-91).

APPLICATION:

So, how many times have we been presented with life changing situations, both positive & negative & we were amazed AND terrified? In reality, the reaction of these women is probably more realistic than many of us would like to admit. And aren't you just a little bit relieved that the editor didn't “clean up” or “edit out” the real human emotions the women had in this section of Mark. Death, even the death of Jesus whom we believe rose from the dead, causes incredible emotions – feelings of loss, imbalance & even terror.

EPISTLE READING – GALATIANS 6: 1-10:

In today's reading from the book of Galatians, we are encouraged – as we journey through out life – to “do good to all people”. Chapter 6 is the application & moral exhortation section of Paul's earliest letter. Galatians is also believed to be the earliest book of what became the New Testament & was written in the late 40s/early 50s CE. Galatians, in some ways, seem like the 1st draft of Paul's later theological powerhouse book, Romans.

Galatians 6: 1-10 offers some key insights not only on how to journey as followers of Christ in Paul's day, but also how to journey as followers of Christ in the 21st century – on this Independence Day. Some of the key teachings include:

- **Restore** or treat each other (& one's self) with a spirit of gentleness (v.1)
- **Help** each other/**Bear** each others' burdens (AND joys/happiness/successes) – which is one of the key reasons we offer a weekly prayer list AND a weekly worship experience ☺ And in order to “offer to bear another's burden, sometime we need to “show up” & be around for people besides merely ourselves. (v. 2)
- Even as others offer to help bear your burden – be willing to **do your part** in bearing your own loads (v. 5)...This attitude of “someone else can do my part, someone else can pay my way” has about bankrupted our country & on this day, we must – as a part of our Christian duty **AND maturity – commit to being responsible for our own life.**
- **What we sow, we reap** (v. 7). Depending on who you are this verse is comforting & convicting. We all use this verse to apply to others who aren't doing what we think they need to, so this morning, I ask...how does this verse apply to you? To me? What am I not reaping that I want in my life? What do I need to sow (or plant) in order to see that manifest in my life & in this world? (For example, I often feel like I'm short of time...so where am I planting time to gain more time? Some of us feel like we're short financially, so where are we planting/spending our money? What are we sowing in order to reap what we lack?)
- **Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap, at harvest time, if we do not give up.** (v.9) “Not grow weary” = “not lose heart”. How many of you are tired this morning? Tired of being stressed, tired of not having all you think you need/deserve. Weary in our bones & maybe even into our souls? How many of you feel like you've lost heart? Maybe life has been really unfair to you this year. This text promises that, at harvest time, we will reap – what we have sown/planted – IF we don't give up. Listen, I know some of you are bone tired & soul weary! Don't give up – please don't give up! Keep the faith; hang out with quality people that feed your soul! God is working on your behalf & will bring about all that you need.

Do you want to know some of the key steps in “finding our hearts” again? One way is found in verse 10 – to take the next right step in regaining our balance & not give up?

- **Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, & especially for those of the family of faith.** (v. 10) Whenever an opportunity presents itself - as we go throughout our daily lives – at work, at home, etc. - **work for the good of all** – do the broadest possible good, for as many people as you can. Especially **for those of the family of faith** (i.e. the family of God) – What might God be asking from each of us when it comes to taking care of the family of faith? What do we need to be about in order to include (& reach) more people with God's message of love? And can we be broad minded enough to include not only the literal “family of faith” known as Our Hope MCC while also including “all people of faith” who desire to be in relationship with us?

CLOSING:

As we close this morning & sing the “Community of Christ” (Chalice, 655) I submit to you that God has/will place numerous opportunities along our daily journey to “do good for all” & so I thank you – in advance – for how you'll embody Christ in the coming week & in the coming weeks here at Our Hope MCC, in Athens & beyond. Amen.