

HOMILY

Independence Day *July 4, 2008*

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What is it that makes a person free? That certainly is an appropriate question for this Fourth of July. By the way, do you know what event we are celebrating today? According to a recent Gallup Poll, one out of every four Americans doesn't know that the Fourth of July commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Even more amazing, the same number can't tell you which country we declared independence from.

Today we celebrate our freedom. In our lesson from Galatians, St. Paul writes, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free, so stand firm, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.*" (Galatians 5:1-5) According to Jesus, true freedom is not merely a matter of national heritage. "*If you continue in my word,*" he says, "*...you will know the truth and truth will set you free.*" (John 8:31-32)

So what is the truth about freedom? One of the most common mistaken ideas of freedom is that one is free when he or she can do as they please. This is the kind of freedom that the Prodigal Son craved while at his father's house. But what happened when the father gave him his freedom? His money gone, his health gone, his reputation gone, kneeling at the trough, trying to snatch a morsel before a hog got it—what a sorry picture of freedom. The same tragedy has come to many men and women and youth in our day! It is when we do as we please that our troubles begin, for nothing worthwhile is achieved without discipline.

Paderewski was the world's greatest pianist, but even in old age he practiced at least an hour a day for otherwise, he was not free to play. A pianist is not free to play any notes he pleases—sharps or flats. He must play the right notes. Freedom without control is disaster. Sure, we have the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast, but on the West Coast, we must have the Statue of Limitations.

How many times have we heard, “To be free, you must be yourself!”? The question is: Which self? The self that drifts foolishly toward loose living or the self that God meant you to be?

When asked what instrument gives the best sound, the accomplished artist Fritz Kreisler replied, “It all depends on who is playing!” Who is playing the instrument of your soul? When God is in control of your life, you are free to be your true self. “Love God,” says Augustine, “and then you may do as you please.” “Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.” In loving him, we are set free from loving the cheap, the petty, the trivial, the foolish, and the sinful. In the life of a nation, as well as in the life of an individual, **True freedom is freedom for right living, not freedom from right living.**

Today we sing,

America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control
Thy liberty in law!

Our country is great, and it is not because we have more land or more people or more natural resources than others have. We are becoming painfully aware that there are countries which have more of these. The greatness of America rests upon a faithful and responsible dependence on “the power that has made us and preserved us a nation,” upon the acknowledgement that our “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” have been endowed by the Creator, that “this nation, under God,” must constantly experience a new birth of freedom.

Today, the spiritual foundations of our nation are in peril. In his classic work, *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*, Edward Gibbon, stated the reasons for the downfall of mighty Rome: “The rapid increase of divorce, belittling the sanctity of the home, higher and higher taxes while the public money was wasted, a mad craze for pleasure becoming more and more violent and brutal, gigantic armaments of war, while the nation was destroyed internally, and the decline of faith fading into mere formality.”

Sound familiar?

We “free” Americans need to heed the Lord’s words: *“Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”* And *“The slave does not live in the house forever.”* As we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we need a new and sincere declaration of dependence on the God of our fathers and mothers, without whom we shall not long enjoy the liberty of which we boast.

A foreign student was asked whether she would remain in America after she completed her study program. This was her reply: “You Americans meet when and where you please. You speak as freely as you like either in criticism or praise of persons and ideas. You have newspapers that give you full accounts of world happenings. You enjoy the benefits of countless inventions to make life comfortable. America is indeed a wonderful land in which to live.” Then she added, “I should like the advantages of your way of living, but I am afraid I am not a **big** enough person to live in such liberty.”

The same idea was expressed by an American missionary who was long imprisoned in a Japanese camp during World War II. When he was asked what he thought about during his imprisonment, he replied, “The thought that was uppermost in my mind was whether I would be worthy of the freedom when I got it.”

The good news of the Gospel is that this freedom and this power are ours as a gift of the Emancipator who assures us, “If the Son makes you free, and you live by this word, you will be free indeed.”