

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Some years ago, I shared the following words in a sermon: Have you ever wondered what happened to the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence?

Five signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died.

Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned.

Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army, another had two sons captured. Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War.

They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

What kind of men were they? Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners; men of means, well educated.

But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts and died in rags.

Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward.

Vandals or soldiers looted the properties of Dillery, Hall, Clymer, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Rutledge, and Middleton.

At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr., noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt.

Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months.

John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later he died from exhaustion and a broken heart.

Norris and Livingston suffered similar fates.

While I would love the above to be factual, it sadly falls under the banner of “fake news!” It is also known as an “urban legend!” How utterly disappointing. I almost feel treasonous in even saying this. As is often quite true of fabricated stories, however, the true story of the Founders and those who fought for liberty alongside them is awe-inspiring enough – and needs no false drama.

Fifty-six individuals from each of the original 13 colonies participated in the Second Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Nine of the signers were immigrants, two were brothers, two were cousins, and one was an orphan. The average age of a signer was 45. The oldest

delegate was Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, who was 70 when he signed the Declaration. The youngest was Thomas Lynch, Jr., of South Carolina, who was 27. Eighteen of the signers were merchants or businessmen, 14 were farmers, and four were doctors. Forty-two signers had served in their colonial legislatures. Twenty-two were lawyers; and one had been Governor of Rhode Island.

Seven of the signers were educated at Harvard, four each at Yale and William & Mary, and three at Princeton. Seventeen of the signers served in the military during the American Revolution. Five of the signers were captured by the British during the war, but only Richard Stockton of New Jersey never recovered from his incarceration at the hands of British loyalists and died in 1781.

Colonel Thomas McKean of Delaware did have to move his family five times in a few months to flee the British and when at last was able to settle them in a little log house on the banks of the Susquehanna... they were soon obliged to move again on account of the incursions of the Indians.

Abraham Clark of New Jersey had two of his sons captured by the British during the war. The son of John Witherspoon, a major in the New Jersey Brigade, was killed at the Battle of Germantown. Eleven signers had their homes and property destroyed. Carter Braxton and Thomas Nelson (both of Virginia) lent large sums of their personal fortunes to support the war effort but were never repaid.

Fifteen of the signers participated in their states' constitutional conventions, and six signed the United States Constitution. After the Revolution, 13 of the signers went on to become governors, and 18 served in their state legislatures. Sixteen became state and federal judges. Seven became members of the United States House of Representatives, and six became United States Senators; while two became Justices of the United States Supreme Court.

Three of the signers became Vice Presidents, two became President. Two of their sons also became President. Five signers played major roles in the establishment of colleges and universities. So, why the need for false drama? Your guess is as good as mine.

The main thrust of this period of our nations' history is the battle for freedom from colonial rule at the hands of the British. Americans love to celebrate Independence Day, to flaunt their freedom before the whole world. Thomas Jefferson's bold assertion that each individual has an "inalienable right" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" still sounds sweet to our freedom-loving ears. Despite the imperfections and foibles of our political system, we still enjoy tremendous economic freedom, political freedom, religious freedom, personal freedom and communal freedom. But we must be careful that we don't define the freedoms we enjoy so much solely as "freedom from" – forgetting that the real test of freedom's value is how we use our "freedom to."

From 1979-1981, I served as a campus pastor/residence hall director at Davis and Elkins College in West Virginia. In seeking to form mature adults the college motto was "Freedom through responsibility." It was not very long before I really wondered at the accuracy of this phrase since my early experience was that the students were practicing 'Freedom FROM Responsibility!' How interesting to read this passage from Paul to the Galatians evoking my very vivid memory of Davis & Elkins.

Paul's caution to the Galatians in this week's epistle text likewise reminds us that sometimes our greatest liberation can be found in our commitments; in our freedoms to. There is our freedom to gather together for the benefit of others, our freedom to love and serve each other and our freedom to express our feelings, concerns, hopes and aspirations for our community, neighbors and friends. (Homiletics Online, 1995) The Fourth of July is a good time to celebrate the paradox at the center of the Christian faith: We

are most free when we are most bonded. Through Jesus Christ's supreme example of freedom in service, we all become the most free when we bind ourselves to Christ. That is why Jesus has been called "omnipotence in bonds." He freely divested himself of his divinity so that he could make the ultimate sacrifice for our sake and for our freedom; and you and I must take care not to confuse this freely offered liberty for license.

The political and personal freedoms we celebrate every Independence Day always remind us that with freedom comes responsibility. For our freedom to "work" we must be good citizens – we must vote, pay taxes, obey the laws, respect property, be loyal and keep the peace. When Thomas Jefferson listed the "pursuit of happiness" as one of humanity's "inalienable rights," perhaps he should have called it more accurately an "unattainable reach." Christ's mandate of freedom through service reveals that the only way to achieve happiness is to love and serve others. Pursuing happiness, focusing solely on the self and its personal pleasures, will never bring genuine joy or the fulfilling happiness of peace. When we pursue happiness for the self, it is like looking for the ending point of a rainbow – as soon as you think you've reached its touch-down point, your perspective changes, and the rainbow's end has moved again.

Truly as followers of Jesus Christ, our 'pursuit of happiness,' is at its best when you and I are seeking to make a difference in the life of another person, whether it be one of your faith community, the surrounding community, or sending those kits to Conference. At the end of the day which feels better – spending the entire day at a Spa getting the works or watching a face light up with joy knowing they will have something to eat, or something new to wear, unexpected school supplies. While I am a firm believer in a good spa day, that never takes the place of a 100-watt smile from someone in need.

A nine-year-old girl observed a friend at school shivering in the play yard during an especially cruel cold snap. Realizing that her friend didn't have the money to spend on a warmer coat, this little girl promptly promised to buy a coat for her. But when the little girl showed up at the local Goodwill outlet to make her purchase, she was surprised that the cost was more than she had anticipated. Nevertheless, she was determined to keep her word to her friend even though the coat ended up costing her every single coin she had saved up in her piggy bank. This splurge of her carefully saved funds caught her parents by surprise and caused them some concern. But when they questioned the wisdom of their daughter's actions, she defended herself by simply stating, "But I promised her, and she needed it!"

Her parents were silenced and impressed by their daughter's free spirit with her money which had been driven by her bonded, sacrificial love for her friend, her "neighbor."

I love the way Paul spells out how we are to act as true followers of Jesus. Verse 13 begins with: *"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."* In case anyone has questions about the desires of the flesh, Paul spells those out as well: *"the acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.* I almost find myself wanting to break out in song, "These are a few of my favorite things!" That is until I read the next line from Paul – *"I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."* YIKES!

By contrast the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

What might the fruit of the Spirit look like when embodied in each one of us:

Joy and Love seem to go together – joy and love are seen when you brighten up a room with your cheerful attitude. You make others glad just to be around you, and your attitude gives hope to others. Your life is full of words of encouragement and of positive and forward-looking thinking.

Peace - your manner is welcoming and embracing, nothing remotely hostile or angry, employing gestures that identify you as a person of goodwill. Others see you as a person whose waters are still and whose inner life is utterly without conflict. This attribute of the Holy Spirit speaks to one's inner satisfaction, contentment and serenity. Like joy, peace is a quality that Jesus expressly gave his disciples. He didn't say, "My patience I give you." He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you"

Patience - a willingness to let others work and move at their own pace according to their skills and interests. Paul's word choice here is one that means to be "far away from anger." A patient person is one who is able – in almost a Stoic way – to remove himself or herself from irritation and anger, and to instead allow circumstances to evolve and move along. A little word of caution here, if you are lacking in patience, I would not suggest that you ask God to give you patience. God nearly always answers this prayer by placing you in circumstances which try your patience.

Kindness and goodness - when we show to others an innate sense of fairness, a life marked by the highest moral and ethical standards, and which touches others with actions reflecting this disposition. A person with goodness is a "salt of the earth" kind of person. He or She's a person without a mean bone in his or her body, a person who's just pure goodness through and through. So goodness is a condition, a state, a quality. Kindness is the arms and legs of goodness. Kindness is goodness actualized. (Homiletics Online, 2019).

Faithfulness - the gesture that indicates you love and commit with no questions asked and that others can depend upon you to do the right thing. A faithful person is "full of faith," that is, he or she is absolutely brimming with confidence in the faithfulness of God. Our faithfulness is a virtue that blesses others. When we are faithful, others learn to lean and depend on us. To have a faithful friend is one of the rarest things. And we can be that person!

Gentleness - when we empathize and put ourselves in someone else's position and treat them as we would like to be treated. Gentleness is the absence of aggression or physical, psychological or emotional abuse. Gentleness is the absence of self-promotion. Gentleness is goodness and kindness with gloves on. Gentleness is a soft word and an understanding heart. Gentleness understands the concept of age appropriateness, allowing people to mature and make choices on their own. Gentleness is the absence of judgmental negativism and private slandering and gossiping.

Self-control - when one offers restraint and self-discipline and, in so doing, identifies as a person who is dependable and trustworthy. This person is seldom out of control, is always the master of his or her emotions and habits and not given to excess. When others are falling apart at the seams, someone with self-control is considered a harbor in the tempest, a rock and a refuge.

There, you have it. I invite you to ponder these words and at the end of each day in the coming week, give yourself a litmus test: Did I express love and joy today? Was I at peace and patient? Was I kind and good? Was I faithful and gentle? And...did I practice self-control? Indeed, after this, I hope and pray each one of you can sing, "These are a few of my favorite things!" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.