

Sunday, July 5, 2026
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Independence Day)
Deuteronomy 10.17-21; Matthew 5.43-48
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Religious Freedom and Striving to Be Perfect”

Today we take a break from our liturgical calendar. While it is still the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, I have chosen not to use the propers—the readings and collect of the day—assigned for this particular Sunday. Instead, I have chosen to use the propers for Independence Day. Even though, according to the rules guiding liturgical celebrations, I should not be doing this since Independence Day was yesterday and not today. However, I felt that this liturgical infraction was warranted given the fact that yesterday we celebrated a milestone in our nation’s history: the celebration of the 250th anniversary of declaring our independence. And also warranted given what seems to be happening to religious freedom after 250 years of independence. So, in honor of our Founding Fathers and Mothers, I am exercising my religious freedom so that we can collectively celebrate who we are, where we have been, and where we are today, as one expression of God’s people in the United States of America. And, to look at where we go from here if the liberties declared 250 years ago are to continue for another 250 years, God willing.

Strictly speaking, the conditions that led to the Declaration of Independence do not involve religious freedom per se. The text of the Declaration of Independence contains precisely four references to God, either directly or indirectly. The first paragraph references “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” as a foundation for independence. The famous introduction in the second paragraph begins, “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.” And the document ends by “appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world” and declares the resolve to formally declare independence to be based on “a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence.” Otherwise, nothing regarding religion or religious practices is included in the substantial list of grievances against King George III and the nation of Great Britain.

While the celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence is the event celebrated on Independence Day, the day celebrates so much more. For it is the signing of this declaration that symbolizes and draws together the previous 169 years of British presence in the Colonies, as well as what would follow, including the Revolutionary War, the establishment of our present form of government, and how we have developed as a nation since. This one document, this one day, being the icon for who we were, who we are, and given the opportunity, who we will become. This inherently includes our identity as people of faith. Of all faiths. And includes those of no professed faith. After all, the First Amendment of the Constitution reads in its entirety: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” While this and the resulting legal doctrine of the separation of church and state were specifically crafted to insure religious freedom, our history with religion has been challenging, to say the least.

From even before declaring our independence, religious differences were present. Each of the original 13 Colonies were largely founded and settled by specific Christian denominations. The southern colonies of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia were all founded as Anglican colonies. New Hampshire also has Anglican roots, with a strong Puritan presence, as well—the Puritans actually being a reform movement of the Anglican tradition. Massachusetts and Connecticut were also primarily Puritan colonies. All these Puritan colonies providing a safe place to practice beliefs in conflict with the established state religion of our mother country. The same applied to other religious traditions seeking freedom of expression not afforded at the time in Great Britain. Rhode Island being a haven for Baptists. Pennsylvania being founded by Quakers, but becoming a “holy experiment” offering religious tolerance and freedom for all faiths—something quite unusual for the day. New Jersey was founded by Puritans, Quakers, and Scottish Presbyterians. Delaware was first settled by Lutherans and later governed by Quakers. New York being settled by Dutch Calvinists. And Maryland being settled by Roman Catholics escaping ongoing discrimination in Britain.

While having a solid Anglican foundation, the nation that developed from the 13 Colonies was a tapestry of varied religious expressions—all Christian, but varied nonetheless. Despite all being Christian, occurring at a time when anything other than the established state religion was viewed as “other” and not readily tolerated. You would think we were off to a great start in terms of religious freedom. And yet, even in the Colonies, there was a certain level of intolerance among religious groups. Even to the point that persecution and violence occurred against those of particular faiths. Catholics were banned from voting in five colonies. In Massachusetts, Puritans hung Quakers for heresy. Baptists were thrown in jail for daring to not be Anglicans. Just to name a few notable examples.

And yet, if this experiment of creating a new nation was to work, the Founding Fathers recognized that all would need to put aside their respective religious biases. Hence their determination that this new nation they were carefully crafting have religious freedom as one of its foundational doctrines. Hence the First Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting the establishment of any religion, Christian or otherwise, as the state religion and ensuring the free exercise of religion, of any religion. A radical statement at that time when virtually every other nation on earth had a designated state religion. When some nations still believed in such concepts as the divine right of kings. No, our Founders sought to create something completely new with respect to religious expression and practice. Not restricted to a particular denomination. Not even restricted to Christianity. Rather, insuring freedom of religious expression for all religions and for all people.

Admittedly, this freedom of religious expression, while sounding great in theory, has not always been carried out in practice. Throughout our 250-year history as a nation, various religious groups—primarily non-Christian religions—have been discriminated against and persecuted. Largely due to the mistaken belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Being majority Christian, yes. Founded as Christian, no. And even various Christian groups have been viewed as suspect. Many will remember concern about John F. Kennedy being elected president because he was Roman Catholic. Stoking fears that his loyalties would be to the Vatican as opposed to the people and Constitution of the United States.

Sadly, in our own time, Christianity has been co-opted by some who seek to return to an erroneous vision of our nation's founding; to an antiquated, authoritarian view of society. The most sanitized and acceptable sounding term for this is Christian Nationalism, referring to a desired return to a mistaken ideal that we are a Christian nation. The only problem being the facts that 1) it flies in the face of our actual national history, and 2) is contrary to the Constitution, specifically the First Amendment and the separation of church and state. But even more than that, the full descriptor is actually White Christian Nationalism. The desire for an established version of Christianity and of a nation that the proponents feel reflects the ideals of our Founding Fathers. Emphasis on Fathers. A view of the Church and America that reflects who and where we were 250 years ago. A time when only landed white men had power and voice. Not women. Not people of color. Not even poor white men. A desire to return to a perceived Golden Age in which our nation and society ran according to Biblical laws. A nation in which women and people of color are second-class citizens—if even granted the right of citizenship. A nation governed by and for white men. And if some of them had their way, a nation governed by and for wealthy white men. All because that was how things were in the Bible. Except Christian Nationalists fail to realize that the Bible does not have any white people in it, and particularly that Jesus was not white. And that he actually preached equality, not exclusion. Details, details.

A system based on notions that, on deeper reading, both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures reject. While containing some less-than-acceptable notions by today's standards, the Bible, at its core, is about love. God's love for his people and how we are to demonstrate that love in our own lives. Including our civic and national lives. Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy contains the injunction from God, "You shall also love the stranger." No qualifiers. Not "You shall also love the stranger only if they look like you, believe like you, or love like you." Calling us to love and accept and include people for who they are, as they are.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus takes that basic concept and expands upon it. Telling his listeners, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Jesus takes this last statement to its ultimate conclusion, when he says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." A statement that causes many to scratch their heads. Be perfect, as God is perfect? Impossible. No, not really. Because the original word translated as "perfect" has additional meanings, which is where Jesus is going with this. The Greek word *teleios* carries the more varied and nuanced meanings of "perfect," but also meaning "complete" or "mature." The sense of reaching a goal, of reaching full development. In this case, the lifelong pursuit of growing into the likeness of God, as first noted in Genesis: humans are made in the image and likeness of God. In the context of today's Gospel, Jesus is calling us to imitate God's impartiality for all God's creation. To imitate God's love that is free of any boundaries. Love that is freely given and shown to all regardless of whether they are righteous or unrighteous. While I do not for a moment believe those who are of different religions than us or of no religion are unrighteous—that is for God and God alone to decide—this injunction makes it clear that we are not to judge and called instead to welcome all, love all, and make space for all.

Wasn't this the fundamental intent of the Founding Fathers in first declaring independence from a capricious and tyrannical leader? Our history of slavery notwithstanding. Wasn't this the

fundamental intent of the Founding Fathers in establishing the first amendment of the Constitution, ensuring the right of religious expression and practice?

Whether intended or not, the Framers of the Constitution—the document guiding the development of their new nation—drew on the same concept of “being perfect” that Jesus invokes. The Constitution of the United States begins with the words: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union . . .” A more perfect union. Not perfect as in flawless, as in finished, as in faultless. Rather more perfect as in the sense Jesus intends in today’s Gospel. A union that is continually in search of wholeness. Of living into the fullness of who God has created us to be. As those who seek to live into the love and acceptance that characterize who God is. The love that we, as the people of God, seek to embody.

We are not a perfect people. We are not a perfect union. But those of us who follow Jesus are guided by a perfect law of love and equality. Guided by a God who asks us, who commands us, to be perfect as he is perfect. The One who commands us to strive to demonstrate and embody the complete and unconditional love he has for us and for all people. With this as our guiding principle as we boldly exercise our religious freedom in our words and actions, we are doing our part to help realize the more perfect Union our Founding Fathers and Mothers yearned for, fought for, and gave their lives for.