DEPENDENCE DAY

2 Kings 5:1-14

July 3, 2022

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

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A minister was once preoccupied with thoughts of how he was going to ask the congregation to come up with more money than they were expecting for repairs to the church building. He concluded that he would just ask for it and hope for the best. And he told the organist that perhaps some inspirational music after his announcement would help put the folks in a giving mood.

So, before the service began, he stood and made his announcement: “Brothers and sisters,” he said, “we are in great difficulty; the roof repairs cost twice as much as we expected, and we need at least $4000 more. So, I prayerfully ask any of you who can pledge $100 or more to please stand up.”

Whereupon the organist played “The Star-Spangled Banner!”

Well, it is almost time for another Independence Day celebration in our nation, and inspiring patriotic music – like “The Star-Spangled Banner” – will certainly be in the background for many of our celebrations. On the Fourth of July we are surely called to remember, to appreciate, to enjoy, and to embrace our independence from any foreign domination – our independence that enables us to be free.

However, on this day, the Lord’s Day, in this little sermon, I wish for us to focus, not upon our independence, but upon our “dependence” – our dependence, that is, upon God and upon other people. For I believe it is through such dependence that we are truly free.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” writes Paul in his letter to the Galatians. “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters,” he goes on, “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Paul continues in his letter to the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

We are truly free, my friends, when we surrender some of our independence - especially our self-indulgence, our selfish ambition – and instead embrace our dependence based upon our quintessential commandment from God to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Therefore, I am calling this day – and every day, for that matter – Dependence Day for us followers of Christ. We need God – and we demonstrate that need through love of God. We need other people – and we demonstrate that need through love of neighbors as ourselves. We need to understand that we are not separate from God – for the Spirit of God exists within each one of us. And we need to understand that we are not separate from other people – we are all human beings made in the image of God. Yes, as Paul writes, for freedom, Christ has set us free. Christ has set us free – from independence to dependence.

I believe that this Old Testament story for today from 2 Kings exemplifies this transformation from independence to dependence in the person of Naaman. Naaman is apparently a quite independent man, a mighty warrior, a successful commander in the Syrian army. But he suffers from leprosy. And he discovers, as the story unfolds, that the only way in which his leprosy can be healed is by depending upon other people – specifically, (1) an Israelite slave girl, who tells him about the prophet Elisha; (2) a messenger from Elisha, who tells him what to do in order to cure his leprosy; and (3) his own servants, who point out the foolishness of ignoring Elisha’s advice. And the upshot of the whole thing is that Naaman comes to understand that his ultimate dependence is upon God, the God of Israel, the One who is really responsible for his healing. So, in the verses following our passage, Naaman proclaims: “Now I know that there is no God in the earth except in Israel.”

This is “dependence day” for this independent military man from Syria. Surely, he is still an independent man, but he has somewhat surrendered his independence by coming to understand his dependence upon other people, as well as his dependence upon God. Naaman has been set free from his suffering from leprosy, and surely this healing miracle is for the purpose of demonstrating the power and presence of God through God’s prophet, Elisha. But the purpose of the story is also for demonstrating the power of dependence upon other people and upon God.

Complete dependence upon God is the hallmark of the thinking and theology of a very important theologian and preacher from the late 18th and early 19th century – Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher felt that we human beings are in contact with God through our natural feelings of dependence upon the universe, and he interpreted our “feelings of dependence upon the universe” as an experience of God. Not only that, but when we become aware of our dependence upon the universe – which is to say, our dependence upon God – then we immediately become aware of our relationship with, and our dependence upon, our fellow human beings, each of whom also has the capacity to experience dependence upon the universe – and, therefore, dependence upon God and other people – whether or not they understand dependence in this way.

In other words, we’re all in this together – in this life, on this planet, in this nation, in this church. The Spirit of God is with and within all of us – whether or not we have yet awakened to that reality. We are never separate from God – and therefore we are never separate from other people. Our egos would have us believe that we are separate; but our “true self,” as Thomas Merton puts it, tells us we are not separate. Our “true self” is the real presence of the Spirit of God in us – and in others.

We can know we are not separate when we surrender our independent egos and embrace our dependency upon God and upon others, and, especially, when we express that dependency through love of God and love of others. Even the historical events and proclamations surrounding Independence Day are based upon dependence upon others and ultimate dependence upon a higher power. And we are certainly dependent upon one another and upon God in this church community. If we were not, this community would have folded long ago.

So yes, we are independent people with differing views and interests, but I believe we are called by God to be dependent people. We are called to put aside some of our independence, put aside insistence upon our own way, put aside personal agendas – somewhat surrender our independence, as Naaman demonstrates in our Old Testament story – and depend upon one another – depend upon God – and demonstrate our dependence through love of God and love of neighbor. It is dependence like this that truly sets us free.

Today we demonstrate our dependence in a big way through our celebration of the Lord’s Supper. For it is through our celebration of the Lord’s Supper that we experience the real presence of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. And when we experience that, we cannot help but understand our dependence upon God – and, subsequently, our dependence upon others. In this celebration, we become the Body of Christ – each one of us – as well as all of us as a community. We are absolutely not separate from God, nor separate from one another, when we eat this bread and drink this wine – symbols for the body and blood of our risen Lord. We depend upon this body and blood for our sustenance as children of God and as a community in Christ.

When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we become embodiments of the love of Christ for this church and this world. When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we surrender our egos and embrace the way of Christ – which is love of God and love of neighbor. When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we are expressing our dependence upon God and acknowledging our dependence upon other people. When we eat this bread and drink this wine, we are not independent people – we are one in Christ and one in community.

So, my friends, I wish you all a happy Dependence Day – this day and every day – in this place and every place.

Let us pray: God of Freedom: Give us the wisdom to know of our complete dependence upon you, and of your intention that we depend upon one another – even as we exist as unique, independent individuals within your community of all human beings and within this community, this church. In Christ, we pray. AMEN.