

*A Tale of Two...Nations*

July 4, 2010

Whitefish UMC

Luke 10:1-11

- † "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way."
- † So begins Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, which chronicles Paris and London in the time leading up to the French Revolution. Wonderful possibility competed with prospects for doom and gloom. And while Dickens wrote these words to describe a particular place and time in history, new commentators have applied them to their own situation as well.
- † These famous lines have uncanny relevance for us as we celebrate our nation's independence today. And yet Luke's Gospel quotes Jesus saying to his disciples, sending them out like sheep among wolves, "The kingdom of God has come near."
- † We might be tempted to disagree with Jesus in so strongly asserting that the kingdom of God has come near in our time. All we have to do is open the morning newspapers or turn on the television and notice the headlines to come to the conclusion that we do not live in such a kingdom. Wars rage

with little sign of a discernable end. Poverty and hunger claim the lives of many, while others live with so much more than enough.

- † Even as we bask in the midst of an incredibly beautiful summer here in Whitefish, images of dying waterfowl and sea life from the Gulf of Mexico haunt us. These are not the signs of the reign of God that we would expect. As one young writer puts it, “in fact, if the kingdom itself knocked on our door with no sandals, no food, and no money (as in today’s gospel passage), we might be tempted to ask it to leave us alone.” (Christopher Henry)
- † And yet in many ways, the freedom we celebrate today is as old, even older, than Charles Dickens or than even Jesus’ words. For three thousand years before Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Hebrew people suffered under bondage in Egypt. They yearned for freedom. God sent a man named Moses who demanded of Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” When Pharaoh refused, God delivered.
- † For freedom is an idea that originates in the very heart of God. As the children learned this week in Vacation Bible School, in the beginning, when God created humankind, God could have made us puppet-like, so that whenever God wanted us to do something, God would just pull a string and we would do it. What kind of relationship would that be? Not one I would like, to be sure, although it would certainly be easier, wouldn’t it?
- † God created us, men and women, with the capacity and the responsibility to act as free moral agents. The desire for freedom is not simply a function of the human spirit. Its source is nothing less than the free will of the living God. And so the freedom expounded by our founding fathers and mothers was not an idea originating with them.
- † Instead it comes from God’s desire that we freely choose to live a kingdom life, which also allows for the choice to take a different path. To be sure, the

path of self-interest appears to be more attractive at first glance. But take a closer look.

- † Joanna Adams writes: “Just as each generation of Americans must learn anew what our Pledge of Allegiance maintains-that civil liberty is a function of fidelity to justice, so each generation of Jesus' followers must learn anew that Christian liberty is a function of fidelity to the law of love.
- † I am not speaking of love in a moonlight and violins sort of way, though in our hard-wired, hard-edged world, we can use all the romance we can muster. I am speaking of love in the sense in which Jesus spoke of it. When he voiced the great commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, he was emphasizing ethics over emotion.
- † The great 20th- century religious thinker Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way: "Basically love means . . .being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."
- † To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of "me, myself, and I". To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self and, as one who is wise has put it, to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service. To be free is to be free for responsibility, not from responsibility. I think of how Christ Jesus who had everything in the world going for himself-power, status, safety-how he chose, freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for the sake of the world. Now that is freedom.
- † I think of how God made us as one human family, irrevocably bound to one another in God's heart and mind from the very beginning so that we are by

nature inclined toward one another. The need of the other is really our own need. The suffering of the other is, in a real sense, our own suffering.”

- † She continues: By the will of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, freedom and responsibility belong together in our lives and in the life of our faith communities.
  
- † The same is true, I believe, for our nation. One of America's greatest gifts to the world is the notion of religious liberty. The state cannot impose religion, and all our citizens are free to exercise religion or not, according to their own wishes. But that does not mean that people of faith do not have a crucial role to play in the life of our nation. We ought to be working every day to create a society that is marked by concern for the common good. We ought to be listening for the voices of those who are not being heard. We ought to be speaking out against excessive self-indulgence and naming the corrosive consequences of greed.”
  
- † In last week’s lesson from his letter to the Galatians, Paul put it so plainly in this regard, "if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."
  
- † I believe that the United States has a particular calling-that we are called to be a servant people, bringing good news to the oppressed, modeling justice, proclaiming liberty to the captives. Can you even think of a time that called for moral leadership more than these troubled days? Oh, what an opportunity we have, what a responsibility we have-to repair, to raise up, to build up, to offer hope for all those who mourn in our midst and beyond our shores.
  
- † Learned Hand was one of our country's most outstanding jurists. He once asked himself, "What is the spirit of liberty?"In answer, he wrote these eloquent words:

- † The spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women. . .it weighs their interests alongside its own, it remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. . .the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, 2,000 years ago, taught humanity a lesson it has never learned but has never quite forgotten: that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.
- † Sisters and brothers in Christ, may our pledge of allegiance be this day to that kind of kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.” For as Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.”
- † How? In the voices of children raised in praise to the creator of the universe and of the smallest creature in the Gulf of Mexico. In the compassion of a fourth grader who hears the story of Neighbors in Need and makes every effort to help in her own unique way. In the love that is shared tirelessly by workers for the abundant harvest of God—whether out shoveling gravel or teaching Sunday school for the first time.
- † As bombs burst in the air over Kabul this day, may we remember the sacrifice of those who defend our freedom as we watch fireworks over Whitefish Lake. And may we also give thanks to the Lord of the Harvest, who in freedom trusts us to use our freedom for love.
- † For we seek to follow Jesus, who on the night....

(Holy Communion is celebrated)

Sources:

Joanna Adams, “The Predicament of Freedom,” <http://day1.org>

Christopher Henry, “The Nearness of the Kingdom,” <http://day1.org>

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities.