

We Hold These Truths

July 3, 2005

Bible Passage: **Galatians 3:28** (*The Message*)

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.

Well, good morning, and happy almost 4th of July to you. For those of you keeping track, this will be my third consecutive 4th of July Sunday to preach. At first I was very honored thinking they purposely chose me to give the message on the 4th because of my background as a history teacher, but then somebody pointed out Linda always vacations on the 4th...oh well.

Indeed I was a history teacher in a former life. I loved history...still love history. Many folks find history boring, but for me history is the most engaging subject of all. History is the narrative catalogue of the struggle to be human. A good rendering of history chronicles the human passion of self-expression.

And for my money, no other statement ever uttered in the course of history so succinctly states the human yearning for freedom more so than that one sentence from the Declaration of Independence. I don't mean to be overdramatic, but if you let that roll around in your head...it is pure poetry. The life between the commas in that sentence is to history as Michelangelo's work is to art. Listen carefully to each part:

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- We hold these truths to be self evident,
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- that all men are created equal,
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- that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights,
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- that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.
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If you are at all like me, regardless of how beautiful it may sound to you now, the Declaration of Independence is just another one of those things we had to memorize back in grade school. You know, the Declaration, the Star Spangled Banner, the Pledge of Allegiance...we said them over and over and over again until they stuck.

What I'd like for us to do this morning is savor each piece of that sentence from the Declaration. The Declaration is one of those things we might say without really thinking about what it means. How often in life is that true...that we recite or read something without thinking much about what it is really saying. How many of you have ever downloaded something from the internet or installed new software and that pesky box appears on the computer screen asking you to read this volume of information then click on "I agree" or "I disagree" with the terms and conditions of this contract?

I think I got through the first paragraph of one of those things once and got annoyed and just clicked on "I Agree" without having the faintest idea what the fine print actually said. I think I am guilty of doing the same thing with the Declaration of Independence...I simply clicked "I agree" without thinking much about it.

The 4th of July *is* a uniquely American holiday. There is an old joke about the American tourist traveling in England over the 4th of July one year. The tourist asked the bartender in a very quiet London pub..."How come you people don't celebrate the 4th of July? "I Agree ...CLICK!"

Nonetheless, even if our friends across the pond won't be hosting BBQs and attending 4th of July parades tomorrow, and even if this truly is a unique American celebration, the spirit behind the Declaration is not uniquely American. The meaning of the Declaration...what it *really* says...is a statement of the desires of the human family regardless of one's global address.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: Or in other words...To us these common principles are obvious...so obvious in fact we are almost embarrassed to waste the parchment and ink to print it.

If you take a philosophy class you can debate the deeper meaning of truth, but in this context truth was intended to be a universal truth. A universal truth is something that is true no matter where, no matter what. So...what are these truths?

...that all men are created equal: To be historically correct, we must wrestle with the fact that the Founding Fathers were *men* of their time. When they wrote "*all men*," they meant *all men*. Specifically, they meant all white men who owned property.

Having said this, Jefferson's intention *was* for eventual universal application. The great fear Jefferson and his co-writers had was that the uneducated masses that had never had any experience of participatory government would overwhelm the system causing it to crumble under its own weight.

As Americans we have struggled through 229 years, 27 Constitutional Amendments, and a Civil Rights movement trying to clarify the meaning of *all men are created equal*. This issue that still

plagues us today is actually an age-old struggle.

The Apostle Paul addressed this very issue in his letter to the Galatians. The Galatians were people in a church that Paul had helped start, but instead of living by the universal principles of equality that Jesus taught, they had taken to separating themselves. Paul said:

In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Without a shadow of a doubt in my mind, if Thomas Jefferson were alive today, that line in the Declaration would read...*that all people are created equal*. And he would mean it as a universal principle with no conditions placed on it.

...*that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights*: Now...here is where we take the kid gloves off and get really serious. Try that statement on for size again...*that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights*.

We have established that "they" means all of us...It is as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said in his recent book *God Has A Dream*, "*In God's family there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian—all belong.*"

Unalienable rights are rights so fundamental that all of us are guaranteed them, and they can't be divided or taken away. This is the dream of the human family everywhere...to exercise these inalienable rights endowed by the creator who created us all.

...that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness: So, god created all of humanity equally and gave each of us rights that can't be taken away. The most important of these are the sanctity of life, freedom from oppressive control, and the right to achieve our human potential.

It is amazing that in the 21st century these seemingly rudimentary desires of the human family, things most of us would agree simply should be, are the exception, not the rule for many of our global neighbors.

As many of you are aware, my brother and I just returned from Guatemala a couple of weeks ago. Of the many stories could share with you, one sticks out in my mind especially in the context of the message today. We stayed in San Lucas Toliman—just down the road is a community called El Porvenir. [Display Picture #1]The name itself, El Porvenir, means "the future" This was a community desperately seeking a brighter future.

The hope for that future began to unfold as 76 families had recently purchased their former employer's coffee plantation. In typical colonial tradition, the families—all Cakchiquel Mayans—had lived on the plantation [Display Picture #2] as a permanent work force, like medieval serfs. The patron of the land provided them with tiny wooden huts for their residences, and their only access to water was a mountain stream nearby. Owning property, their own property, held out the prospect of hope and a brighter future.

Things that we take for granted in a free and independent society, these people didn't understand. Things like how to simply conduct a meeting or how to vote. They were unsure how to organize themselves to petition the government for access [Display Picture #3] to improved roads, sanitation, or water. Such concerns were understandable given that all their lives they had been told what to do and when to do it.

I met a man named Andreas Chajil [Display Picture #4] who summed up what this newly created freedom and independence meant to his family and his people. He said, "This land is freedom. For the first time in my life I have dignity. I can support my family, I have my own house, [Display Picture #5] I am proud to be my children's father."

Against small odds of success, the families of El Porvenir made great headway in the process of community building. These people's thirst for freedom and dignity was the intangible force that moved them toward their own independence. According to [Display Picture #6] Father Greg Schaffer, a priest from San Lucas who has walked with these people for 40 years, "it was *this intangible progress that was equally important in acquiring a sense of independence and responsibility.*"

It is this intangible progress that is at the heart of the American Declaration of Independence. 229 years ago, the Declaration of Independence was a statement to the former patron of our land... King George III of England. 229 years ago we Americans purchased our own land with a revolution and acquired our own sense of independence and responsibility.

And that document does come with an enormous sense of responsibility. The responsibility is to read the entire document and digest it completely before clicking on "I agree." I believe when we click on "I agree" we have said yes...I agree, all people are created equal regardless of where they live, regardless of how they vote, and regardless of how they pray.

CLOSING:

Politician and general Carl Schurz said, *If you want to be free, there is but one way; it is to guarantee an equally full measure of liberty to all your neighbors. There is no other.*

Tomorrow as we gather with family and friends to celebrate American independence, it is my prayer that we'll find time to think about the common desires we share with all of humanity to pursue life, liberty and happiness.

Have a great Sunday. Go in peace. AMEN