

Sermon, July 5, 2020
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Grace, Mercy, and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Happy Fourth of July Weekend to you all, and may the promises of our national project be further realized by our prayers, our improvement as a people, and our commitment to the values that have undergirded this nation for the past 244 years.

Ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, we continue to work on this project, and it seems, now more than ever, we conduct that work even as we are bitterly divided about which directions that work should take us. Those famous words, penned by Thomas Jefferson continue to be both a beacon of hope and inspiration to many people around the world, as well as a point of conflict and contention in our own history.

The second sentence reads: “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.”

How important language is, and how easily we can fail to understand or live up to the truth of the very words that gave birth to a nation. For even though Jefferson claimed it to be self-evident that all men are created equal, we also know from history that he didn't really believe it in a literal sense. Last summer, on a family vacation to Virginia to visit friends, I and my family had the opportunity to go on a tour of Monticello, Jefferson's residence in the rolling hills southwest of Washington DC.

This residence was stately, and contained the many rooms that Jefferson lived and worked in, mostly after his 2 terms acting as president of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Of course, the most glaring contradiction, and what he will perhaps be ashamed of in the end, was the row of slave houses just off the southern edge of the lawn. Here, during the course of his life, Jefferson housed

over 600 slaves to operate his plantation. While he was known to advocate against the slave trade, he also believed in the superiority of whites as a race, and only freed 9 of those slaves in total, two before his death and seven more in his will after he died.

It doesn't take a Phd in history to tell that this country is still contending over the question of just how equal all men are, and whether the category "Men" should refer to all people, regardless of sex, gender or ethnic background. Some call the legacy of slavery in America our original sin, for which we have not fully atoned. And as I've said in these sermons before, a dispassionate look at the data reveals the severity of the ongoing inequalities that fuel the social unrest we see today.

The question of the meaning of that word "men" in the Declaration of Independence resonates with another milestone and set of anniversaries that we as Lutherans observe this week. On June 29, last Monday, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America observed the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Lutheran church in America. It was June 29th, 1970, that the LCA, one of several Lutheran denominations that joined in 1988 to become the ELCA, voted to change the wording of their constitution to read, "persons" instead of "men". This allowed for the ordination of the first female pastor, the Rev. Elizabeth Platz, that same year. As of 2017, about 27% of all clergy in the ELCA were women, and that same year, about 50% of all Lutheran seminary students were women. My predecessor, the Rev. Carol Brighton, was Redeemer's first female pastor and she served here for 14 years. In 2013, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, was elected as the first female Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. And as of 2018, 16 of the 65 synod bishops of the ELCA were women, including our own Bishop, the Rev. Tracie Bartholomew.

In addition to the 50th anniversary of women's ordination this past week, the ELCA also is celebrating 40 years since the predecessor bodies to the ELCA first ordained an African American woman, the Rev. Earlene Miller. On top of that milestone, it was 10 years ago this past week, that the ELCA became the first Lutheran church body in the US to offer ordination to LGBTQ members as well. More conservative Lutheran churches, such as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and the Lutheran Church Wisconsin Synod, as well as a few smaller Lutheran church bodies, have not agreed to ordain women or LGBTQ people, and they are often quite vocal about their opinion that the ELCA has lost its soul.

However, in these bold, if late, changes to church policy, the ELCA believes it is following the lead of the Holy Spirit to not only preach the full inclusivity of Jesus' Gospel, but also live it out in its policies and practices.

So if there is a comfortable fit between these two examples, it is because they have to do with the meaning of the words that we have chosen to live by. In both cases, the challenge has always been how to recognize the full dignity and value of the people that the words are meant to refer to. In the case of our country's founding documents, the challenge has and continues to be making the 244-year old line, "all men are created equal", truly refer to all people, not just white men. In the case of our church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the challenge has been to take that same word, "men" and open it up to any who feel that they have been called by the Holy Spirit into ordained ministry.

The philosophical connection is that freedom and equality are not static ideas that are set in their meaning, but they grow to include more and more people because of the ongoing dialogue in society about their truth. Words are important. So, if you are going to commit to equality for all in your Declaration of Independence, then you had better stand up for equality in all you say and do. Likewise, in the case of our church's polity, if you are going to try to live according to the radical inclusiveness of Jesus' teachings, then you had better actually welcome all the people God seems to be calling into the ministry of the church. It is true that in the case of ordination, not everyone is called in the end to such ministry, but the point is that there be no arbitrary disqualification based on gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. If the people we think are most equal to us, or most viable as pastors, are the ones who most look and act like us, then there is a strong chance we are not following the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but a gospel of our own making.

Committing ourselves to the truth behind the meaning of our words challenges us to be steadfast in the face of resistance. We know from today's gospel lesson how fickle people can be, and how quickly the truth of our words and actions can be distorted by the slander of our critics. Jesus struggled in all his relations with the powerful leaders of his day, as did his predecessor, John the Baptist. Those public leaders responded to John and Jesus in completely contradictory ways, based on who they were criticizing. For John the Baptist, who was notoriously severe in his preaching and spiritual practices, they rejected him as possessed by a demon.

Then when Jesus came on the scene and promoted an attitude of joy and celebration, they criticized him as a partier and a drunkard. It seems like they will do whatever it takes to hold onto their power, even if it means branding two prophets--from the same tradition--preaching about the same kingdom--in totally contradictory terms.

But we know this was not unique. We can see how closed-minded people were to the radical inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God. For those in power, Jesus' teaching of radical humility and gentleness was intolerable. In John's fire and brimstone preaching, it was always God who would unseat the proud and send the rich away empty, but that made leaders nervous. Imagine a nation that was originally built on slavery and the supplanting of native peoples, suddenly agreeing to change the rules for all people, to match the generosity of the Kingdom of God, whose king comes humbly, "and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

And yet that is the wide open nature of the invitation Jesus gives in our lesson today. "Come to me, ALL you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and your will find rest for your souls." Imagine a savior who preached refuge and rest only to those with the most power, or those with a specific ethnic background, or those of a single gender. Imagine a kingdom where those who can trace the history of their disenfranchisement could never expect the king to address it in any meaningful way? Indeed, we know this is rather par for the course as human kingdoms go, even if, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, the long arch of history bends towards justice. But imagine if our historical neglect of the truth was also the case for the kingdom of God. What an epic failure, on an eternal scale. What a hopeless situation indeed, what a terrible waste of everything that ever went into creation in the first place. What deep sadness there would be, if we didn't have the promise of the Kingdom of God, setting the bar for human community, and relentlessly challenging our communities, our governments, our organizations, our churches, our selves, to let go of the will to power and dedicate our lives to the spiritual and material well-being of all people.

But thanks be to God, that the Psalmist proclaims the truth this morning, that "you O Lord, are faithful in all your words, and loving in all your works." For where humans fail to live up to the words they choose, even as they grasp at eternal

principles, God's words do not fail. Where human practices exclude and differentiate in order to dominate, God's works unite us under the gracious life, death and resurrection of the king of glory. And as the psalmist says this morning, God's actions in our midst "uphold all those who fall and lift up those who are bowed down." Not only is this promise the true hope of all the disenfranchised, the neglected, and the oppressed, but it is also the true hope of those who find themselves on the winning side out of dumb luck at birth. For who will rescue us from this body of death, but the Lord himself, Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for our sakes, and picks it up again in order to be our gentle King. May his promise of eternal life, for all of us together, give us new courage to claim noble truths and seek to embody their full, radically inclusive meaning.

And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.