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Proper 9C – Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
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St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

As we all know, these are the words on the base of the Statue of Liberty, the first thing that immigrants entering New York harbor by boat can see. I have been thinking about these words, not JUST because today is the fourth of July, a day when we celebrate the birth of this country so founded on the principle of giving refuge by protecting individual rights, but also because they seem so much the opposite of the words that Jesus speaks in our Gospel today: ‘I am sending you out like lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.’

One is the promise of comfort, of peace, of a better life and a different way. One is a frightening challenge, a promise of hardship and perhaps even danger. Yet both presume that outside of their realm there is a great deal more suffering than inside. And both are a kind of calling home, an invitation and an explanation of a world that is longed for, a description of a place worth risking our lives to seek: a new country, or a new kingdom.

The difference between them, though, is the way it is found.

America, of course, is a place to forge one's own identity, one's own destiny, a place where anyone can presumably grow up to be president, where the status of one's birth is not an impediment to one's greatness. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from persecution are the touchstones of our national ideal. By contrast, being a Christian is all about following, all about giving away our individual selves for the promise of our collective lives. It is about not having an identity that makes sense apart from the identity of our Savior. It's about not even knowing where we are going, only that a lot of it is not going to be easy, only that we are not going to get to do the driving.

And I think it's hard for us, particularly those of us who live in this country where freedom is so cherished, to hear good news in this statement that seems to presume submission by the followers of Jesus. We are so used to believing that we have choice and agency in everything, that we can and should be taking care of ourselves, that it seems self-evident that it is the only way to happiness. To place ourselves at the mercy of others seems almost un-American, despite the fact that so many of our ancestors arrived on these shores in the very state that Jesus proscribes for his disciples.

It seems to invite an uncomfortable level of vulnerability, even violence. We know how bad it can be out there.

And yet it is exactly the kinds of inhumanity that we know we are capable of that should cause us to consider what we mean by freedom, those of us who call ourselves Christians as well as Americans. Because so often the tendency is to believe that it means the capacity to do anything we like, which, as we know, can also be a very dangerous thing.

This country was founded by those who were struggling against the kind of leadership that felt it was free to oppress those on foreign shores. And the defeat of that oppression by a struggling band of patriots was accomplished by believing that beyond our own power there is a larger law, one that is based absolutely on love, on justice, on eternal life.

When we call ourselves Christian, then, we bind ourselves to the belief that we are not the final arbiters of any of those things, but merely the humble seekers. That absolute justice, absolute freedom, absolute love are all the provenance of God, and the best we can do is to keep moving towards them.

But to truly hold this belief in this country today is not a particularly easy thing to do.

Freedom is assumed here, it is practically copyrighted, and our individual choices have a sanctity that allows us to believe that whatever feels right, is right. That our artistic expression and our political beliefs and even our spirituality are matters of our choice, our own internal moral compasses. To suggest otherwise is considered secular heresy, or religious fundamentalism.

But the difficulty in declaring ourselves free is the danger of falling into complacency, or at worst, tyranny of our own. We can be so sure that our own will is necessarily what is right that we can fail to see where we are being rightfully challenged, where we are being called to re-examine our beliefs and our lives.

I think we see this more and more in our increasing cultural divisiveness - especially in politics and religion. Each side has its own notion of freedom, and it feels stifling to the other. Each side secretly and sometimes not-so-secretly feels that true freedom will come when the other side is subdued or vanquished.

But this is actually the opposite of the notion of freedom that our country was founded on, and it is certainly the opposite of the Gospel.

Today we read from Luke a passage in which Jesus clearly states that we are called to put aside our own selves, our own needs, our own tribes and even our freedoms, in order to declare and to discover the kingdom of God. In this it seems clear that part of the freedom of the Gospel is laying down the burden of our own insistence that only we know the truth, and the resting in the strength of the God who is leading us, the God who owns our very lives.

This is not easy.

And this is not saying that we should not stand up for the principles that we hold dear. But it IS saying that even when we are very sure that we are standing for what is right, and ESPECIALLY when we are very sure that we are standing for what is right, this is when we should most remember our reliance upon God.

One of our greatest modern saints, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has also proved to be a major prophet. Between when he left Germany during Hitler's rise to power, and when he returned there because he felt compelled to give his own life to the cause of fighting Nazism, Bonhoeffer spent time in New York, teaching at Union Seminary.

He was troubled by a tendency in American Christianity towards what he called 'institutionalizing freedom,' becoming so consumed with freedom as an ideal that it missed the opportunities to embrace it in a radical way, as he saw both Jews in peril in Europe and African Americans struggling here turned away from the doors of churches that were proclaiming their commitment to freedom.

In a 1939 essay, Bonhoeffer wrote "the freedom of the church is not where it has possibilities, but only where the Gospel really and in its own power makes room for itself on earth, even and precisely when no such possibilities are offered to it. The essential freedom of the church is not a gift of the world to the church, but the freedom of the Word of God itself to gain a hearing."

Bonhoeffer pointed out then what is still so true today – that to us, freedom is not so much a noun but a verb.

That binding ourselves to the Gospel means that we cannot declare ourselves complete yet, but that we are still waiting for the completion of God. And the good news in this is that we are still being surprised, still being challenged to see love pushing us beyond what we already know.

We are still yearning to be free, still expecting oppression to be overturned and safe harbors to appear before our weary eyes.

In their book, 'Resident Aliens,' Duke Divinity School professors Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon discuss the strange juxtaposition of our Christian lives as in this world, but not of it. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes that 'our citizenship is in heaven,' and the authors state that this can also be translated as 'we are a colony of heaven.'

And they further write that 'the church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another. In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens.'

And I think that as Americans, that word, 'colony,' is especially helpful. Because it reminds us of our roots as a nation, our struggle to become free of oppressive power, and it reminds us that part of that struggle WAS born of what was learned by many of our nation's founders as Christian disciples.

It was born of following the power of the Gospel – our country's founders submitted their very lives to the belief that the love that is stronger than death is also the love that is stronger than tyranny and hatred. But of course, part of being in this colony that Hauerwas and Willimon describe is remembering that we are never completely at home in any country, that we should always be willing to shake the dust off of our feet.

That our citizenship in heaven means that there are dangers in too closely associating our immediate needs and even our safety with what true freedom means. That to put aside what we know and we own and follow Jesus means that sometimes we will have to question our lives, our government, our assumptions, sometimes we will have to give up what we want in the name of what we believe. That our faith in God will bring us beyond all of our boundaries, that there are times when our liberty may rely on our repentance, that all of our actions are still subject to the ultimate judgment of the cross.

And so today is Independence Day, a day when we rightfully celebrate the throwing off of the shackles of oppression, that we re-assert that all of us are created equal and deserve to be treated equally with respect and dignity, a day when we are understandably proud to live in a country founded on these principles.

But only as long as we remember that today is DEpendence day. Today and every day is the day that we remember that the definition of freedom is our reliance on the love and forgiveness of the God who created us and rose from the dead to redeem us.

And that to live into this freedom is to yoke ourselves to the good news that the love of God is still revealing itself, that we are still searching, still following, still compelled to reach beyond ourselves. That the life of the disciple will require us to remember our ultimate citizenship in heaven, our perpetual identification with those who are tired and burdened and huddled.

And that no matter how long we have been here, in this country or even in these pews, we are still scouring the shore for home.