



Homes for Our Neighbors

Give Me Liberty!

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Galatians 6:1-16

No man thinks more highly than I do of the patriotism, as well as the abilities, of the very worthy gentlemen that have just addressed the House. But different men often see the same subject in different lights.

Patrick Henry began with these words his most famous speech in St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia, on the night of March 23, 1775. It never occurred to me that Henry might have been a closeted Baptist. Different people often see the same subject in different lights? That's our only working creed, don't you know?!

Well, many Virginians were still arguing for a strategy of appeasement with the British crown, but Henry believed all that amounted to was a decision for slavery over freedom. By the time he came to the crowning words of his argument that every school child remembers, his voice had reached fever pitch. The words still stir every patriot's heart: *I know not what course others may take. But as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!*

Give me liberty. I would rather have death than not be free.

That's not so different from what the Apostle Paul declared in his letter to the Galatians. For five Sundays now we have been making our way through this letter, tracking Paul's rhetoric as his voice strains to be heard. *For freedom Christ has set us free, he screams off the page of our Bible. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

If you read Patrick Henry's speech—and for that matter, if you read the speeches of most American patriots, you will hear echoes of biblical language time and again. Even though some of them were not orthodox Christians, they knew their Bible, and they drew from the Christian gospel their sense of the nature of human existence and God's desire for freedom. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that although so many think of the modern world as the product of the rise of reason and science at the expense of religion, I believe the opposite is the case.

What motivated Gutenberg to invent movable type? It wasn't the publishing business per se; it was publishing the Bible and putting it in the hands of common people. Which also meant taking it out of the exclusive possession of the clergy. Luther then translated the Bible into German and Tyndale into English, making God's Word as accessible to the pew as to the pulpit. The Protestant Reformation effectively separated salvation from the clutches of the church and allowed each man and woman to stand on individual conscience before God. It was a short step from there to the idea of political democracy. We didn't need a pope or a king to guide us rightly. All authority could now be questioned, because everyone could relate directly to God—through the mediator, Christ. Soon, secularists didn't see why Christ was the necessary mediator, either, but the point is that it was the Christian gospel that set in motion revolutions like ours.

So today the Fourth falls on a Sunday, and we are naturally thinking about the liberty. Patrick Henry cried out for it, and we are doing so too as he did—in a church. Now, America is not now and never was a

Christian nation by law, despite what every third e-mail you will receive today will try to say. But the Christian faith and the church that practices that faith still have something to say to America—and it should. And on this day I would say that we should join that patriot of the American flag, Patrick Henry, and that patriot of the Christian flag, Paul of Tarsus, in saying, *Give me liberty, or give me death.*

But what is that liberty we so desperately seek? It's easy to lose our mooring to the meaning of words.

Even at the beginning of our nation, this was true. "While conversing with some friends at a local Philadelphia tavern, Benjamin Franklin was accosted by a drunken man who had overheard him discussing the Declaration of Independence. Slandering the document, the young fellow shouted at Franklin: *Aw, them words don't mean nothing at all. Where's all the happiness the document says it guarantees us?* The quick-witted statesman replied, *My friend, the Declaration of Independence only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself!*

Life, liberty, and the *pursuit* of happiness. If we've had trouble understanding that the pursuit of happiness, not happiness itself, is the right, the meaning of liberty has also been slipping.

When Patrick Henry cried out for liberty, he meant by liberty the right to self-determination rather than have someone else—king or Parliament, for instance—determining the course of one's life and livelihood.

He meant that people ought to have a say in how their own lives are governed. He did not mean that liberty means doing whatever we please to please ourselves. He didn't mean our freedom to care only about our self-interest at the expense of others.

We have to fight for a proper expression of freedom as much today as we did at the beginning of our nation. In that same speech, Patrick Henry said this also: *The battle ... is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.* And today we must be vigilant, active and brave in defense of liberty.

But when I say this, I have to hasten to add that that doesn't mean what it seems to mean so often these days—that is, a justification of war with other nations or with rogue terrorists. Whether such wars are justified is another matter that I don't mean to take up today. What I do mean to take up is a meaning of freedom that includes the twin virtues of responsibility and generosity.

Paul warns that we must not fall back into slavery once we have tasted freedom. And like Patrick Henry, he calls us to fight for freedom. But his words are a little different. He tells us to "stand firm." We are to be just as strong, just as vigilant, just as active and brave in our patriotism for Christian liberty as for our protection of political liberty. But this requires an inner discipline, a substance that will teach America anew about the true and fullest sense of liberty.

In the sixth chapter of Galatians, after Paul has been crying out for Christian freedom, he comes back to say that we must beware lest we fall into all kinds of temptation. One of those temptations is declaring our rights without accepting our responsibilities.

All must carry their own loads, Paul says. True freedom is a gift that can only be given; it cannot be gotten. But while it can only be given, it can also be given away.

God has made us free by nature. On this the founders of our nation and our faith agree. And when we fall into slavery of any kind—whether political, economic, or spiritual slavery to sin—we have to be delivered from it. Christians believe that unless and until Christ delivers you from your slavery to sin, you will still be mastered by someone other than God. So pay attention to your own life, he says. Don't look at your neighbor to see what he is doing. Don't look to judge someone else's life as if you are already fit yourself.

Take care that you yourself are not tempted, he says. *You reap only what you sow. If you sow to the flesh, you will reap corruption. If you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life. Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.*

Our Baptist faith tradition is founded on this idea of responsible freedom. Because we believe that each soul is free, we don't baptize anyone against her will. Even if others are well meaning in doing so,

baptizing infants is premature because they cannot consent on their own. They have to be responsible for their own lives before God. And then that responsible freedom extends to church membership. We each of us have to take up the cause of the church ourselves. If you are a member of this church and you leave it to others to pray for it, to teach its youth, to guide its decisions, and to support it financially, you are giving away your birthright of freedom in Christ.

When we function the way we ought in the church, we teach the world about responsible freedom. Too many people in this country expect something for nothing. And when I say that in a mainly wealthy white church, I can see your heads nodding as you think about those people on the dole who don't want to work and just want a government handout. But I have to tell you that the same can be said for those of you who oppose every tax and would rather bankrupt the government than pay to keep libraries open, to keep police and firefighters on the job, and to keep our air and water and food clean enough that we can all live well together. If you don't vote or participate in our democracy, you are giving away your freedom irresponsibly. But if you participate for the sake of your own interests alone, true freedom is equally in danger.

And this leads to the second thing. True liberty is known only in communal well-being and not in individual self-interest. We are losing the ties that bind our country together. When we formed this nation, we understood, as Ben Franklin aptly put it, that we had to hang together or we would all hang separately. We had to look out for one another. We had to look after the well-being of our neighbor or we could feel no confidence about our own. As Chesterton would later put it about all of humankind: *We are all in the same small boat on a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty.*

Paul said as much in Galatians. *So then, he says, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.* He then goes on again to make plain that we must not think more highly of ourselves than others on the basis of things of the flesh. We can't make differences among us while at the same time appealing to Christ as our Savior.

America dearly needs the church to remind her about this dimension of liberty. Freedom that is denied to one is freedom denied to all.

But these days we hear rancorous and uncivil rage from people in our own community who want to protect their property values at the expense of their low-income and no-income neighbors. Like every city with homeless persons on the street and with low-income residents who can't find affordable housing, Dallas is trying hard to solve this for good. We know—and I do mean know—that permanent supportive housing solves the homeless problem. But every time we try to implement mixed housing options in any neighborhood, homeowners lose their religion in favor of their pocketbooks. *Not In My Backyard.* That seems to be the new declaration of independence. But people like Patrick Henry did not prefer death to slavery so that he could keep his less-fortunate neighbors out of his sight.

We model a different kind of community in the church—one that says we are free only when we are free together, one that says that freedom from oppression by others is only half the battle; the other half is to be free for fellowship with others. Every time we refuse to pit rich against poor, young against old, healthy against ill, highly educated against less schooled, white against black or brown, we model true community and give America something higher to aim for. Every time we give to the general fund that benefits all instead of only designating our giving for our pet projects, we give America a model to true community to aim for.

Give me liberty? That's the cry America ought still to make to heaven. But America ought to make that cry because she has seen evidence of true liberty in the church that is the colony of heaven on earth.

What we have to give to America when she calls is this: a living example that we are truly free only when we are both responsible for ourselves and working for the good of all our neighbors. Give us that, and only that, kind of liberty.

