

Gracious and loving God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we may now the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hurting, and hungry, and dying without the knowledge of your love and care. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose” (Kristofferson, 1970)

Fifty One years ago this month, a young Nashville songwriter named Kris Kristofferson wrote these words as part of the chorus to a song made famous by Janis Joplin – the song was entitled *Me and Bobby McGee*.

It’s a song about lost love and missed opportunities all summed up in the line, “I would trade all my tomorrows for one single yesterday” as the narrator laments the poor decisions that she had made.

Today, we celebrate the 245th anniversary of our Declaration of Independence – our declaration of freedom if you will – from England and King George III. But true freedom for the American colonists didn’t come for another 5 years with the victory at Yorktown. And even then, the freedom that was received was only for those colonists who happened to be primarily white and primarily male. The rest of the population didn’t gain their freedom until later in American history.

- Black slaves were freed as a byproduct of the Civil War – but true freedom and equality for blacks didn’t occur until the civil rights struggles of the 1960’s and today in 2021, there are still issues that make me wonder if we’ve made any progress at all.

- Women may have been free – but their full rights to property and the vote didn't come until the ratification of the 19th amendment to the Constitution in 1920. Yet, there is still a long way to go before full equality is a reality.
- Native Americans – here before anyone else – had their lands confiscated and were herded onto reservations for their own protection, or at least that is the story. Their freedoms were taken from them because they stood in the way of white American expansionism and still, despite treaties saying otherwise, there is no respect from the US Government for the tribal governments and their sovereignty. And this area has several connections to one of the most tragic stains on our national history in the Trail of Tears.

This American Experiment has been anything but perfect – and we are all aware of the flaws, but the *ideals* represented by the Declaration of Independence have stood the test of time.

The men who sat in Philadelphia in the First and Second Continental Congress who crafted this document to define liberty, and those who sat in the later Confederation Congress who developed the Constitution that guides our republic today were certainly not perfect – and they certainly weren't all Christian. Many of them were Deists who believed that there is a God, but the God that they understood was one who stepped away after creation and had no more contact with humanity. Together they represented the greatest intellect that our country has ever known to be gathered in one place. Their ideas were revolutionary. Nothing that

they envisioned had ever happened before in all of human history. Yet they had faith. And for the most part, they had a belief in a creator – something greater than ourselves that has a hand in our affairs and our destiny.

They may not have all believed in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but they understood the need for us to worship God in our own ways – without interference from the state. And they understood how the church and the state should be separate from one another, they were all only a couple of generations separated from the religious wars that had consumed Europe since the dawn of the Reformation – but not so separate that the church could not have influence over the state in matters of human treatment and interactions.

As we prepare to enter into this 246th year of independence, though, I am concerned for our nation. I am concerned because it seems that we have lost our way. We have become polarized in our positions and our thinking. We have become so enveloped in a winner-take-all attitude that places being *right* above being *righteous*, that we have lost sight of what it means to be American. At the same time, it seems that we have lost sight of what it means to be a Christian.

Too many times those of us who claim to follow Christ have lost our compassion for the poor and the outcast. Our hearts have become hardened toward those who have been knocked down by life and who seem to be stuck in a never ending cycle of addiction, rejection or abuse. We have lost our compassion for the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan while, instead, we demonize them and blame them for their fate and for the general malaise that we feel about ourselves, our church, our nation, and our world. The love of God and neighbor that is supposed to be our standard has become buried under the rhetoric espoused by the

noisy gongs and clanging cymbals that Paul speaks of so eloquently in First Corinthians 13 – the “love” chapter.

In too many instances, those of us in the Christian tribe have been content to place our hopes and our dreams on political solutions to our problems. We have placed our bets on there being a political messiah to bring us back to a greatness that never was, or who will lead us to a place of hope that can never exist outside of Christ. We’ve hitched our wagon to the horse that promises to fulfill our desires or confirm our prejudices... take your pick. But we do so at great peril.

You see, if our hope is built on anything less than Jesus Christ, we’re following the wrong pathway. Jesus IS the solid rock on which we must stand. Jesus IS the foundation upon which we must build. To take any other tack, or to simply ignore the teaching of Jesus is folly for it substitutes the sinking sand foundation of *Christendom* – that shallow, social combination of church and state that, ironically, our American forefathers were seeking to escape for the life giving, life changing, rock-solid freedom that comes from living as *Disciples* of Christ.

In our scripture lessons this morning, we hear a lot about freedom.

We hear a lot about bondage.

We hear a lot about truth and how that truth can set you free from the bondage of sin.

Without Christ, we are slaves to sin. We are in bondage to an inner nature that desires to do those things that please us.

The bondage of sin is that sin separates us from God.

The grace of God, embodied in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, is that through our faith in Christ, we are released from that bondage to sin and death.

Through Christ's sacrifice for our sake, the chains are broken and we experience the release that is ours in Christ.

It is through Christ's resurrection that we have been given victory over sin and death – they hold no power over us – and we have no need to live in the fear of separation from God's all-powerful love for us.

The freedom that we experience in Christ is far greater than anything that we can experience without Christ. It is a true freedom that comes from relationship with the living God as we live in service and love with one another.

Let's not "trade all of our tomorrows, for a single yesterday," looking back at an idealized past, but let's move forward in Jesus' name as the Body of Christ to *model* Christ for this community. Let's be the people of peace and love, reaching out in peace and love for all people in Jesus' name.

In just a few minutes we will celebrate Communion together this morning. The way that we will do it here in the sanctuary will utilize the pre-packaged communion cups that contain both the bread and the liquid. It isn't ideal, and it isn't the way that we will continue to share going forward. But *is* the way that we will share this morning. In the next few minutes, as we hear the music as we think about the offering, I invite those of you who are watching online to take the bread that you have in your cupboard and the juice, or any liquid for that matter that you might have on hand, and bring it together as we celebrate the Holy Meal. No matter what you have or where you are, I invite you to come:

- Come with a heart open to the love of Christ for us

- Come with minds open to possibilities that you cannot imagine outside of Christ
- Come and experience the doors opening to the power of Christ working in us and through us for the sake of the world

Come and be fed.

Come and be refreshed.

Come and experience life.

Come, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

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