



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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***“The Radical Independence of Me”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Romans 14: 13-23; Philippians 2: 1-8*

*July 5, 2020*

*“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.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”*

*“We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States...”*

*“And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”*

Now, those of you who are historians will know that I skipped a fair amount of text in the middle there. But these words, adopted by the Continental Congress and signed by its president, John Hancock, on July 4, 1776, are the very foundation of the freedoms that stand at the core of our national identity. It's that word, though – 'freedom' – that I want to spend some time on this morning.

In many ways it's become something of a cultural buzz-word. It's certainly something that gets a lot of play in our faith tradition. As churches we are free from the control or direction of judicatories or denominations. As individuals we are free from the dictates of creed or theological dogma. These are things that are core to what it is to be a follower of Christ in the Congregational Way and we cling to them tightly. And, the same rings for our wider culture. Save our families and our faith, there is little we hold more dear than the freedoms we know as citizens of the United States of America – freedoms that find their roots in those words penned nearly 250 years ago. But, here's the challenge. Over the course of those 250 years that sense of freedom – the very meaning and implication of that word – has gradually grown more and more focused on 'me,' and less and less concerned with 'we.' And in that, I suggest, is where we run into the challenge that confronts us all!

I'll never forget a dialog I shared with my father – many years ago now. We were walking through a Zoo with the family and found ourselves discussing the blessings and challenges of American capitalism. As the conversation continued, he turned and said, “The difficulty is that a capitalist society cannot thrive unless the corporate entities within it function with a fundamental sense of civic responsibility.” Let me say that again... “The difficulty is that a capitalist society cannot thrive unless the corporate entities within it function with a fundamental sense of civic responsibility.”

That comment etched itself into the depths of my brain like few things my father ever said to me. Not only, of course, because I think it was a perspective on capitalism in our society that is worth considering – but because those words really drove me to consider then, and in the years that have followed, the greater, fundamental, underlying principle that freedom, at its very core, has to be imbued with a sense of the ‘we,’ and can never be allowed to sink into the depths of the radical independency of ‘me.’

That’s the core of these passages we’ve shared from Paul’s letters this morning. As is often the case with Paul, context is key in deciphering this passage from his letter to the church in Rome. We need to remember that, in these times of the early church, Paul is dealing with faith communities filled with those from two very different religious and cultural backgrounds. Many in the church are native Jews – those who came up through the same faith as Jesus himself, and who adhered to the principles and practices of the Jewish traditions. Many others, however, were Gentiles – or non-Jews – who had come to believe in the message and teachings of Jesus, but who didn’t have the Jewish background and didn’t feel the need to subscribe to those Jewish traditions. Ritual purity, cleanliness, circumcision... all of these became points of contention between these two groups, and high among these points of contention was the issue of food.

The Jews had strict rules as to what they should eat – and, of course, what they shouldn’t. The Gentiles, on the other hand – they didn’t. The problem, of course, was that food was as central to the church then as it is today. They ate together – a lot. At those gatherings, Gentiles wanted to be able to eat whatever they wanted to eat, while the Jews wanted the food to be limited to that which was within their religious practices. That’s the circumstance to which Paul is writing – but the fascinating part is that his answer really reframes the entire question altogether. ‘Sure, Gentiles should be able to eat whatever they want to eat.’ Paul says. This was a pretty common response from Paul in these debates – he did not feel as though the Gentile believers should be constrained by the Jewish traditions. With that said, however, he goes on with an entirely new framework to consider the true question at hand. ‘But it’s not really about what you are allowed to do,’ Paul says, ‘it’s about whether or not what you are doing is hindering the others around you.’

That’s what Paul is going for with his comment about putting a stumbling block in the path of another. Paul is very clear here – you are allowed to do what you want – but that doesn’t mean you should. ‘Because,’ Paul says, ‘if what you are doing is putting a stumbling block in the way of another – that’s on you!’ Paul responds to this debate about who should be free to do what by turning the question completely upside down and suggesting that it’s not about what they are or are not free to do at all – but, about the manner in which they will exercise that freedom in light

of how one's actions impact the others around them. In his letter to the Philippians, of course, Paul says it much more plainly. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2: 3-5)

Hold onto that notion for a minute as we turn back to where we started. We need to notice the language of that Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths..." "We declare..." "We pledge..." "By the authority of the people..." This was a document of a people about a people – this was a document about 'we,' not 'me.' Now, I don't mean to gloss over the fact that many of those who were part of this moment still had a lot to learn about the claims they were making – just as many of us do today. And I am fully aware that the constitution that followed a decade later did absolutely turn its attention to a lot more of those individual rights and freedoms that are core to our national identity. I'm not arguing against that in any way, nor wanting in any manner to denigrate the incredible privilege and blessing that is ours to know those freedoms. What I am trying to drive home, however, is that all of those documents were composed in the context of an assumed importance of the 'we' over the 'me.' These words were written with a fundamental conviction that the freedoms we have, and the privileges we know, would be embraced in the context of civic and social responsibility and would not succumb to the depravities created by the radical independency of 'me.'

You see, what I want to suggest, as we rejoice in the freedom of our country on this July 4 weekend, is that there is an important distinction, societally, between independence and autonomy. Autonomy suggests a right to self-determination and governance. Autonomy suggests the privilege of freedom. But, autonomy still leaves room for the connectedness of people and the responsibility I have to the 'we' of which I am a part. Independence on the other hand, especially in the manner in which it has evolved over the course of the last 250 years, has become all about 'me.' Independence, in our culture, has become increasingly about what is right for me...what serves me...what is best, most comfortable, easiest or in any other way most preferable to me. And that mindset is not only a recipe for societal disfunction, but is simply anything but the perspective our faith calls us to hold.

In these past months we have been asked, in many ways more than any other time in recent history, to consider the nature of our freedoms. In these past months we have been forced, again and again, to face the question of whether we are going to strive forward with the radical independence of 'me,' or the autonomous freedom of 'we.' Or, if I can bring it back to Paul's letter – we've be increasingly confronted with the discernment of when that which seems right to me might be putting a stumbling block in the path of another and, when it is, what we're going to do about it.

Now, there are a lot of faces one might put on this question – and I'm not going to try to delineate them here. That's a reflection for each us to have, with God, on our own. All I'm going to say is that, no matter what the context is or with which framework we look at it, the Biblical response is clear: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2: 4-5)

There are a lot of challenges we face in our lives, and in the circumstances of today. I would argue that the road past many of them, however, starts with an Independence Day reminder that, perhaps, just maybe, our freedoms mean that we shouldn't be acting quite as independent as we so often do.