**OPENING REMARKS** for Independence Day service, July 7, 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

It's always a great pleasure to share this joint Independence Day service, and I'd particularly like to express our gratitude to the caretakers of this beautiful church for making it possible this year as every year.

Last year Sheryl – one of my co-pastors – used the image of cobbled stones cemented together in construction as a metaphor for the ideal of bringing together people of diverse backgrounds and opinions to create something that is, if not stronger, then certainly more lovely and interesting than square and uniform bricks could accomplish.

And I think a similar message might be found in contemplating the ancient wood, the warm, natural light, the antique architecture...all the elements of this place that speak to a much earlier time, and the beauty and value and significance of staying connected to those times. It's always good to be reminded in a compelling way that the world didn't begin with us and that we didn't suddenly just appear out of nowhere.

The highest priority of every tyranny is always to destroy the past, because people cut off from or alienated from their own history are the easiest to indoctrinate and thereby control.

The forces giving shape to our own modernity, especially the runaway train of technology, the black hole of moral narcissism, and the totalitarian insistence on conformity to the constantly shifting requirements of group-think, represent the serious possibility of tyranny in our time and place. Those forces are almost irresistibly shaking us free from tradition, from shared history and community memory. The danger of these forces and possibly their very intention is basically to reduce us all to blank slates, upon which new identities and personalities and commitments can be imposed from the outside by those who control those forces. The utopia towards which this profoundly thoughtless momentum is leading is the utopia of the hive, where everyone thinks the same, and where everything is coordinated to best serve the interests of the beast at its heart.

And that, perhaps more than any other reason, is why it's so important that communities make an effort to remember their past. No matter what forms the efforts of preservation may take, they all serve the purpose of bolstering and reinvigorating our endangered memories.

And so as we sit here in this weathered church, breathing the air of its history and the many and various lives that have breathed that same air, as we gather from diverse origins to participate in an American commemoration that applauds rather than attacks our national ideals, as we sing hymns that praise freedom and Independence, even as we sit and squirm in these extremely uncomfortable pews, because, well, if those earlier folks could take it for an hour, so can we....As we do all this and more in this historically rich and beautiful place, let us be mindful that we are all, under God, free and independent spirits, and that today, at least, we are not repudiating the past, but rather adding to it.

**THE SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE** Message for Independence Day 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Let's begin with a quotation.

*The 2nd day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America, to be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty from one end of the Continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore. You will think me transported with enthusiasm, but I am not.*

The quotation is a selection from a letter that John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, dated the third of July, 1776. It's interesting that he references the second of July, isn't it? But that was in fact the day the Declaration of Independence was passed by the Continental Congress, although it was not formally approved until the fourth.

Of course the exact date doesn't really matter. We're not celebrating a day, after all, but rather what that day represents, a Declaration of Independence from foreign rule by a confederation of thirteen separate colonies who wished to govern themselves.

What followed that declaration was a war that lasted for a long time. It lasted eight years, in fact, the longest war in this country's history before the current century.

We call July 4th Independence Day, but it's not actually the day we achieved independence. You'd have to be quite a history buff, in fact, even to know when it ended, when victory had finally been achieved, when we truly became independent. I had to look it up, myself, and relearned something I probably knew in grade school, that the Revolutionary War officially ended on September 3, 1783, with the signing of the treaty of Paris.

So what we celebrate as a nation every year about this time is not really our independence, but our *declaration* of independence. We are not, at least first and foremost, celebrating the military victories or the martial values that led to those victories; but rather we are celebrating the qualities of faith and determination and moral courage that led the representatives of those thirteen independent colonies to risk their all in a declaration that things must change, that even death, in the pursuit of independence, was preferable to life in subjection.

And I think the collective wisdom of the generations of Americans that chose to celebrate the declaration rather than the achievement of independence arose out of the awareness of a truth that has application everywhere in life: that the achievement of anything good and enduring depends on the spirit in which the accomplishment is undertaken.

This is a fundamental human truth that is recognized throughout human history. The spirit that animates an enterprise is what gives the enterprise its essential quality, and where that spirit is good and strong, so will the enterprise be good and strong; where the spirit is hateful and vindictive, so will be whatever arises out of it.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to this great human truth when he insisted that the spirit of love must animate the pursuit of equal rights. I quote him here:

*“In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”*

It's the same thought that Jesus offered and illustrated over and over again. When he spoke of the impossibility of picking grapes from thorn bushes, he wasn't teaching about horticulture; he was insisting on the necessity of making the spirit right, before undertaking action.

With that thought in mind, this morning I'd like us to take some time to analyze a particular spirit, the spirit of American independence that manifested itself in the public action of a handful of representatives on that early July day in 1776.

The first thing to note is that it is what I will call a 'civic' spirit. It is a spirit that we can hope and pray might animate those who are acting in positions of civic responsibility. Because those representatives gathered that day in Philadelphia were there, first and foremost, not to advocate for themselves, but to advocate for the citizens of their particular states. The spirit of independence was not a spirit of “me, me, me”, but rather of “my fellow citizens and I.” On the 4th of July, we are not celebrating the independence of an individual, but of a people, of a community.

With that said, I'd like to suggest that there are at least three ingredients to that civic spirit of independence that defined it and gave it its lasting vitality.

The first is that it was a spirit of moral courage. It was based on a conviction of moral right and wrong, and it was asserting its own determination to pursue the right, come what may.

Let me again quote Martin Luther King Jr:

*“Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles; …. Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right.”*

It is a good thing to be brave; it is a great thing to be brave in determined defense of one's conscience, of one's moral conviction. Patrick Henry famously said, “Give me liberty or give me death,” words echoed eight decades later by a woman we've spoken about before from this pulpit, Harriet Tubman, who said:

*[I had reasoned this out in my mind, there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.](https://www.azquotes.com/quote/297667%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)*

So moral courage was one element of the Spirit of Independence. A second was mutual regard. It was not a dog-eat-dog spirit, it was a spirit of community agreement and action. The representatives who co-wrote the Constitution of the United States some few years later shared this same spirit, and it is enshrined in the opening words of that document:

***We*** *the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect* ***union****, establish justice, insure* ***domestic*** *tranquility, provide for the* ***common*** *defense, promote the* ***general*** *welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves* ***and our posterity****, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

The civic spirit of independence was not a spirit of rancor and vanity; it was a spirit of respect and mutual good-will. The lack of this element poses an internal threat to a polity as great as any that might come from outside. George Washington took pains to make that clear in his Farewell Address:

*The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism....The disorders and miseries, which result, gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty.*

So it was a spirit of moral courage and mutual respect. The third element I'll mention this morning is national self-confidence. It was the willingness, as a community, as a republic of united states, to assume authority, to act independently, and to accept responsibility for those actions and for the outcome of those actions. This willingness to live and act independently is made explicit in the closing paragraphs of the declaration itself where it is solemnly declared:

*That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.*

But it is important to remember that it was not an arrogant assertion of self-confidence, but rather one made in the full awareness that the values being asserted and claimed have their own higher authority, are grounded, not in the ordinary motivations and fallible intelligence and suspect moral musings of men and women, but rather in the faith in a higher source of inspiration, a deeper well of love, and a wider reach of assurance.

It was a confidence that rested fundamentally not on an estimate of personal strength and personal wisdom and personal righteousness, but on the faith that a higher source of strength would sustain and a higher source of wisdom would lead and a higher source of righteousness would ensure that the new nation would not only be independent, but would be just and good, and deserve its freedom.

In the raucous, preening, vituperative circus of avarice and cowardly self-protection that passes for the halls of governance in the current era, it would be well to pray and therefore we do pray for a rebirth of the true civic spirit of independence. It would be well to pray and therefore we do pray that the civic spirits of those we select to govern us be spirits of moral courage, of mutual respect, and of the humble acknowledgement that true justice, mercy and wisdom are derived from a higher source than human ambition and pride. It would be well to pray and therefore we do pray that they be inspired with the same spirit that voiced the closing words of the document of declaration that we are celebrating here today:

*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.*

Amen.