

Glorious Liberty

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, 3 July 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-29, 58-67; Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.

That opening hymn we sang today [*Hymnal 1982, #544*] is one of the old favorites of mainline denomination church-goers: “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun doth his successive journeys run.” I get a kick out of verse three, the “infant voices” proclaiming “their early blessings on his name.” I can just hear those crack-of-dawn screaming babies...

But the image that really *jumps* out at me every time we sing this hymn is in verse four: “Blessings abound where’er he reigns: the prisoners leap to lose their chains.” Especially when our ever-creative organists accompany that line with little hops on the keys and pedals, can’t you just feel those prisoners “leap to lose their chains”?

Today, leaping to lose chains fits right into our Independence Day weekend celebrations. Eleven score and fifteen years ago, our founders took the leap to “lose their chains” of British rule. They launched a long struggle to win our independence and secure our identity as Americans. Yet nowadays, far more than in 1776, we inhabit a global village, don’t we? Communications are instantaneous, travel ubiquitous. Cultures mix. Class divides. Economies and ecologies interact with dizzying complexity.

So how can we celebrate independence if not by equally recognizing our *interdependence*? And in today’s world of so much diversity, where can we find our securest identity?

I

One of the more fun dramatizations of interdependence as well as identity that I’ve heard of jumped out at me from a library book I borrowed about a year ago. The book is a collection of sports anecdotes. In an offbeat way for me, one particular selection from that book speaks to our celebrations this weekend. It speaks to me especially as I hear all that St. Paul pours out in his letter to the Romans about his inner struggles as “captive to the law of sin that dwells within” as well as his “glorious liberty” as a child of God [Rom. 8:21] that he ultimately comes to claim.

The incident I’m referring to happened about thirty-five years ago—in the same nation our forebears lost their chains from two-hundred thirty-five years ago. I gather the dauntless duo of Brits involved knew each other beforehand. They led risky lives, and so must not have been surprised to discover themselves together in a physical rehab center. One was recovering from broken wrists, the other from broken ankles. Their more immediate concern,

though, was this rehab center’s cuisine. As one of them comments, “The food was awful.” He and his buddy therefore decided that a temporary declaration of independence was in order.

Into their car they climbed. The guy with the broken wrists worked the pedals; the fellow with the broken ankles handled the steering and gear-changing. “We sneaked out,” boasts the pedal guy, “and operating the car in this way, made our way to a restaurant and had a slap-up meal.”

On the way home, the police pulled them over. The officers had noticed that the steering/gear-changing fellow had “his plastered legs leaning out the window.” As the pedal guy explains, “Much discussion followed as to the merits of... two incapable people combining forces to drive the vehicle.” And yes, he acknowledges, “the police were winning the argument...”

So much for glorious liberty...

II

What can we learn from those two briefly liberated escapees as well as from the scriptures this weekend?

For starters, I suggest that there is value in recognizing our brokenness. St. Paul certainly didn’t shy away from acknowledging his. Nor did those hobbled characters fleeing from the “awful food” deny theirs. Likewise for us, as a nation and as individuals, we need to face facts—the brutal truth. Only then can we begin to envision creative change.

On our national level, for example, I was struck by an observation made in this week’s issue of *Time* magazine by chief editor Richard Stengel. He writes about our country’s Constitution in view of current political controversies. When you look at the beginnings of this revered document that’s so much a symbol of our national identity, you come to appreciate, he notes, that it “was born in crisis.”

It was written in secret and... at a time when no one knew whether America would survive. The Constitution has never *not* been under threat. Benjamin Franklin was skeptical that it would work at all. Alexander Hamilton wondered whether Washington should be king. Jefferson questioned the constitutionality of his own Louisiana Purchase.

“Conflict is at the core of our politics,” Stengel goes on to emphasize, “and the Constitution is designed to manage it” [*Time*, 7/4/11, p. 32]. St. Paul would say that we in our very

humanity are designed to manage conflict, and we need to face it.

Which leads me to another realization: We claim our independence by making the best of our *interdependence*. Jesus in the gospel doesn't mince words about the conflicts he sees among people of his generation. You bicker and squabble like bratty kids in the marketplaces, he lectures the crowds in the passage we heard today. But he doesn't stop at merely calling them on their contrariness. He goes on to describe the dynamic divine interdependence he shares with God the Father. That more perfect union, bonded by love, is the hidden, holy wisdom of God revealed to the likes of infants—and to lovers like the couple singing in the Song of Solomon, and maybe even to Isaac and Rebekah meeting in our first reading. Jesus' point for us all is that using our differences creatively—counterbalancing our weaknesses with our strengths—empowers us for the struggles we face. Then our yokes become easier, our burdens lighter.

Not unlike, I dare say, two “incapable people” from a rehab center, “combining forces to drive the vehicle.”

So, again on our national level, imagine how much more capably our elected legislators and executives today could “drive the vehicle”—guide our nation, our municipalities—through the myriad complexities of our many struggles if only they worked *interdependently*. Debt crises, unemployment, health coverage—yokes and burdens like those can be eased, lightened when leaders combine forces rather than bicker and squabble like bratty kids in the marketplaces.

And so, recognizing our brokenness, making the best of our interdependence—if that's all we learn today from our two “incapable people” from the rehab center, then maybe their caper is to be commended after all.

III

But wait—you thought you could see where their story was going, didn't you? There's more...

Yes, the police *were* issuing them a summons. But in the process it seems the officers asked to see licenses. Turns out the pedal guy's name actually was Guy—Guy Edwards, a respectably good racecar driver. His career took him even as far as Formula One.

The other fellow, however, was a talent of a whole different order. His license would have read “Stanley Michael Bailey Hailwood.” The officers no doubt recognized right away that they had before them, in person, the legendary motorcycle racing champion Mike Hailwood—“Mike the Bike,” as he was affectionately known. In eight years at the elite level, Mike Hailwood garnered nine world championships, seventy-six Grand Prix wins, and fourteen Isle of Man Tourist Trophy victories. All the while, through the 1960s and into the mid-'70s, he also competed in world-class auto racing events.

So yes, his rehab center escapade with Guy Edwards took a decidedly different turn once the officers recognized him as “Mike the Bike.” As Edwards tells: “Immediately,

all was forgiven, autographs provided and off we went.”
[*Memorable Moments in Motor Racing: Legends & Personalities Tell their Stories*, compiled by Mike Jiggle; David Barzilay, ed.; Cyan Books 2005, p. 78]

Which leads me to the most significant realization we can gain today: Never underestimate the power of identity—of who you are.

The power of identity—of who you are—is at the heart of what both St. Paul and Jesus are telling us today. All of Paul's outpourings about his inner struggles lead him nowhere until the end of this passage when—did you notice?—he bursts out in joy remembering who he is: that he's first and foremost God's beloved. “Thanks be to God,” he exclaims, “through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Likewise Jesus grounds his whole being, all the wisdom he and we can ever claim, on his total identification with God the Father.

The point for us all: We are God's beloved. And in that true identity we find our glorious liberty as well as our ultimate security. For to know whose we are, is to know who we are. Then our yokes become easier, our burdens lighter, whether we're Americans or Brits or whoever.

One final note on Mike Hailwood: his true identity transcended his numerous victories. Whatever his practice of religious faith may or may not have been, he must have had an innate, intuitive sense of whose he was—of whose we all are. Because if, as Jesus affirms, “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” how else can you explain Mike's actions during the 1973 South African Grand Prix auto race?

A terrifying crash occurred during that race. The car driven by one of Mike's fiercest competitors left the road and exploded into flames. The driver was trapped unconscious. When Mike came upon the scene, he stopped his car, climbed out, and into the inferno he leaped. He released the driver's belts, and straddling the car's sidepod, tried to pull his fellow racer free from that blazing prison. His own driving suit caught fire—forced him away to swat out flames. Then back into the blaze he plunged. Eventually he succeeded in extracting the driver, who miraculously survived with only minor injuries.

For that act of liberation, Mike Hailwood didn't win that race—he didn't even finish that race. He did receive the George Medal, Britain's highest award for civilian bravery.

There are victories and there are victories. But “glorious liberty”?—that blessing comes only from the power of knowing who and whose we truly are.

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