

Out of Our Fingertips Straight from Our Hearts

Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 4 July 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: II Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

In the spirit of Independence Day, I've got a couple of patriotic questions for you. I'll read a short quotation. And see if you can tell me what day in the year 1776 the speaker was referring to. That answer ought to be obvious. Then see if you can tell me who the speaker was. Ready? Here's the quotation:

[This day...] will be the most memorable... in the history of America. I am apt to believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward forever more. [Quoted in David McCullough, *John Adams*, Simon & Schuster 2001, p. 130]

Okay, so the day and the speaker? If you guessed July 4th and John Adams, congratulations!—you are... half right.

Yes, the speaker was John Adams, our second president, one of the most illustrious of our nation's founders. But no, the day Adams was referring to was not July 4th; it was July 2nd.

What happened on July 2nd, 1776?

The answer to that question has helped me come to a fresh appreciation of what's at the heart of today's gospel passage as well as what was in the hearts of our nation's founders.

I

What happened on July 2nd, 1776—or rather, what got started—illustrates what's obvious in today's gospel passage: the importance of having a method to get out your message.

July 2nd, 1776 was the day the Continental Congress, representatives of the twelve colonies meeting in Philadelphia, first voted to declare independence from Britain. The delegates' resolve was clear, which is why John Adams was so enthused.

But, what Congress had to do next was the intensive work of refining the language of the Declaration draft. For example: The slavery issue—should slavery and the blatant contradictions it posed to the principles of liberty be addressed in the document or put on hold for later consideration? (The delegates put it on hold.) Another example: Explicit, damning indictments against the King and against the British people—should these be included or omitted? (The delegates opted to omit.)

Amazingly, this editorial process moved quickly. Thanks in large part to the skills of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, Congress took only two days to agree on changes to Jefferson's draft and move for a ratifying vote. And so on July 4th, the Declaration of Independence was made official—which is why the 4th, not the 2nd, actually emerged as the most memorable day in the history of America.

The celebrations didn't begin until July 8th. In Philadelphia, the Declaration was read publicly. Bells rang. Candles illumined the windows of homes. Bonfires blazed. The King's arms were ceremonially removed from the Statehouse and tossed onto one of those blazing bonfires.

Messengers on horseback began transporting the good news of independence out to the colonies. Celebrations burst to life everywhere the couriers arrived—and they didn't arrive in Savannah, Georgia until August.

Back in Philadelphia, meanwhile, an elegant signers' document of the Declaration was commissioned. This huge piece of parchment was officially signed by the delegates on August 2nd, a full month after that first vote.

What does this little slice of American history [from McCullough, Ch. 3] tell us? For me, it highlights why Jesus in today's gospel passage cares so much about method—all those detailed missionary instructions he doles out to seventy-some of his earliest followers. He cares because the how, what, who, and when *matter*. *How* we express our faith matters, just as at the birth of our nation, how the language of the Declaration of Independence should read mattered. *What* issues need to be dealt with right away and which ones are better put on hold for later consideration matters. *Who* needs hear the good news

and *when* they're ready to hear it matters. And yes, delivering good news with all due dispatch matters.

II

At the same time, how easy it is to confuse mission and message. Naaman the Syrian in the first reading today was so hung up on insisting that only the prophet in person could heal him that at first he couldn't even hear the prophet's message that healing would be his in the Jordan, even in the "foreign" waters of the Jordan. Likewise, St. Paul in the second reading tries to get the confused Galatians to realize that how one becomes a Christian is a whole lot less important than getting the message that anyone can become a "new creation" thanks to the Jesus' sacrifice on the cross—that the cross of Jesus "is everything."

And yes, Jesus above all knew that detailed instructions about method won't matter a whit unless you have a message to tell. And he has a message to tell.

Which leads me to my most invigorating Fourth of July realization: I've come to appreciate how much the words of some of our nation's founders sound and feel like—a whole lot like—the message that Jesus sent his seventy-some followers out to tell long before.

This message Jesus sent with those seventy-some early followers is one he sums up in a phrase: "The kingdom of God has come near to you." Go and tell people that "the kingdom of God has come near to you." Tell them that the boundless love of God who created, sustains, and redeems all creation is yours for the sharing—yours and mine to pass along so that all people may truly be free.

Notice, too, that Jesus is quick to check his followers' pride when they come back boasting of their own success. Don't be full of yourselves, he warns. Rather, "rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Again, same message: Rejoice that you're cherished forever in God's love. Rejoice that you're secure forever in God's safe-keeping. For to know you're loved and to know you're secure frees you love all the more—which is true freedom.

Now listen for echoes of that same message in the words of some of the more illustrious of our nation's founders.

Benjamin Franklin, for starters: That blue insert in your service bulletin quotes his appeal to George Washington for chaplains to the houses of Congress. "God governs in the affairs of men," Franklin affirms. "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without [God's] notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without [God's] aid?... I therefore beg..." he continues, "that... prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this

Assembly every morning before we proceed to business..."

Thomas Jefferson, too: Here's one who literally took his scissors and snipped out from his Bible any reference to miracles. Nor could he reconcile himself to any possibility of resurrection. Yet apparently even he agreed that the concluding line of the Declaration of Independence ought to include the phrase, "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence"

[McCullough p. 132].

And yes, John Adams—he, for me, was the most inspiring of all the founders. Adams especially welcomed that phrase about "reliance on the protection of divine Providence." In his later years, his faith moved him to find beauty in life's little things, even in such seemingly trivial things as commas and colons in sentences. "[I]f I attempt to look at these little objects," he wrote,

I find my imagination, in spite of all my exertions, roaming in the Milky Way, among the nebulae, those mighty orbs, and stupendous orbits of suns, planets, satellites, and comets, which compose the incomprehensible universe; and if I do not sink into nothing in my own estimation, I feel an irresistible impulse to fall on my knees, in adoration of the power that moves, the wisdom that directs, and the benevolence that sanctifies this wonderful whole.

[McCullough, p. 630]

Somebody once said that "an ideal is never yours until it comes out of your fingertips" [Florence Allshorn]. Adams' ideals, like those of others among our nation's founders, came out of his fingertips straight from his heart.

So my prayer this Fourth of July is simple: May we in our nation today, no matter what religious tradition we do or don't espouse, search our hearts and find some of our own "adoration of the power that moves, the wisdom that directs, and the benevolence that sanctifies..." Let that adoration in and from our hearts bring us the message and mold our method.

Starting there, and with God's help, we could come a long way toward bringing the kingdom of God nearer yet.

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TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
3243 NORTH MERIDIAN STREET
INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46208
317-926-1346

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www.TrinityChurchIndy.org