

Interdependence Day

Sermon for July 3, 2016

Tomorrow is the Fourth of July. Independence Day. Independence Day is the day we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the day we declared that the colonies were independent of the tyranny of the British Crown. The Declaration of Independence declared the right of the colonies to self-determination, the right of our people to jointly decide for ourselves what our society will be and what direction it will take.

But in the United States today, we tend to celebrate not the independence of our country but the independence of the individual. We take 'self-determination' to mean the right of each individual to decide how he or she will wield their power and influence to push society in whatever direction does them the most personal good, or the right of each individual to support the weaver of whatever story promises them the most gain in the future, no matter how implausible that story can be shown to be.

But individual independence is not what the Declaration of Independence is all about. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The text of the Declaration of Independence ends with these words: "And for the support of this Declaration, with firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortune, and our Sacred Honor." And when some were hesitant to sign, Benjamin Franklin told them, "Come, gentlemen, we must hang together or surely we will hang separately."

There is a name for this mutual caring. Stephen Covey talks about three steps of human maturity. When we are born, we are totally dependent on those around us for food, shelter, even access to that first life-giving breath. As we grow, that dependence decreases, until we reach a stage of life where we effect our separation by becoming independent – not wanting to give help to or accept help from others. This stage is also called "teenager." But then we move on to the third stage of maturity, where we recognize and respond to the fact that we are all interdependent and that, to be successful, we need to simultaneously support and accept support from others. One way of defining "interdependence" is "taking responsibility for one another's success."

Unfortunately, the culture of the United States is largely stuck in independence. We are so deathly afraid of dependence that we are not able to move on to that third phase of maturity, interdependence. You only have to watch the way people drive in traffic to realize that we think that taking responsibility for the success of others makes you a chump.

This failure to live with the reality of interdependence is partly because we are, relatively speaking, a young culture and have not yet reached full maturity. But it is also because the people who wield power in this country benefit by the masses being at one another's throats, not cooperating. This was pointed out to me by Pastor John during the conversation that led him to ask me to preach today. All the ways in which that is true is a sermon for another day, but the most astute listeners among you will have heard hints before we are done today.

If independence is each one of us being responsible for grabbing our own piece of the pie, interdependence means each of us working to make sure the pie is just as big as needed for everyone to get a piece. We do that by making sure that everyone has what they need to be able to do their part in adding to the pie.

If this sounds a lot like God's vision of distributive justice, you are close to the Kingdom of Heaven. John talked two weeks ago about how Saint Paul was way ahead of his time, and may still be way ahead of where we are today. Paul tells us in First Corinthians 12 "for in fact the body is not a single member but many...if the whole body were an eye, what part would do the hearing?" Meaning that each of us has a part to play on a team, that none of us can do it

alone. And in Romans 12: “and we have different gifts, according to what was given us by grace...if the gift is service, you must serve; if it is teaching, you must teach.” Meaning that we rely on others to play their part and they rely on us to play our part as well. And in our text for today, Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” We’ve already talked about how this was referring in particular to helping one another avoid and bear the burden of sin. But if sin is separating ourselves from God, we can see that failure to follow God’s admonition to strive for distributive justice through interdependence is one of the burdens of sin we are told to help one another bear.

This is the first Sunday of the month, when our youth traditionally serve a meal at the New London Homeless Hospitality Center. What part of that mission is fulfilling the law of Christ by bearing one another’s burdens? If you say helping those in need, assuaging the burden of hunger of the clients, you are only half right. Maybe less than half. Yes, those who serve the clients are building up credits towards being judged sheep, not goats, in the final reckoning; feeding Jesus by doing it for the least of his sisters and brothers. And that is a very good thing.

But if you think that is interdependence, you are missing one word. That is bearing *another’s* burdens, not *one* another’s burdens. You are falling into the trap of John Foster Hall who says, “We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don’t know.” If you focus only on what you are doing for others, you miss the point of interdependence. You leave out what others are doing for you, what you need others to do for you. At the shelter meal, the law of Christ to bear one another’s burdens is fulfilled in the fact that the cooks are bearing the servers’ burden of needing something to serve. The shoppers are bearing the burden of the cooks who need something to cook. The farmers are providing something to shop for. And it flows the other direction, too. The farmers need someone to buy their output, the shoppers need someone to cook their purchases, and the cooks need someone to serve their creations.

At the shelter meal, the cooks take responsibility for the success of the servers, and the servers take responsibility for the success of the cooks. And that accounts for Paul’s apparent contradiction in verse 5 of our reading, when he says, “⁵For all must carry their own loads.” Each player on the team must play their part in the interdependence, must take their share of responsibility for the success of all, just as the quarterback must throw the ball and the wide receiver must catch it.

And the clients? They need the farmers, the shoppers, the cooks, and the servers, but we also need them. Not just to consume the food, not just to complete the chain. A wise seeker once said, “Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach them to fish and they’ll sit in your boat and drink beer with you.” The change of the punchline is not just for comedic effect; it is also to make clear that the goal is not to make the recipient independent, but to help them take their place in the network of interdependence. The clients at the shelter meal have so much to give. If you sit down with them, each one of them has a story to tell, a lesson to give you. Maya Angelou says that as long as there is breath, there is the chance to do good.

And if you’re not the kind of a person who can sit down with someone with a life experience that is that much different than yours, if you can’t connect with a lesson that is that far outside your learnings, then that fact is also a lesson you can learn, about where your talents do and do not lie, and what part of the body you are meant and are not meant to be. And if you are not comfortable with that lesson, you have the opportunity to work to change your place in the network of interdependence.

It’s hard work to reach the maturity of interdependence. The generosity of this church’s outreach shows our concern for others, our willingness to give when asked, our ability to bear another’s burdens. Not so easy to come by is the willingness to ask for help, to be part of bearing *one* another’s burdens. I found this extremely poignant when I took Disciple a decade ago under a previous spiritual leader of this church. The DISCIPLE manual has a place each week to record the prayer concerns of others in your group, and it seems pretty clear to me that

it is intended that the group ask one another to pray for the help we need in our faith journey, in understanding the Scriptures and the class materials, and in our secular and spiritual life. Not once in 34 weeks, as my group shared our joys and concerns for others, did I ever hear anyone ask for prayers for their own needs, nor indeed did I do it myself.

When we say that we as a nation have not reached the maturity of interdependence, we don't mean that we are not interdependent, only that we have not matured enough to act like it. As the song says, "Lean on me, when you're not strong,/ And I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on./For it won't be long/ Til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on." True in itself, but hard to do if you're not in a network that practices interdependence all the time. Like the practice of excellence and the practice of forgiveness, the practice of interdependence in the big things is only available when you practice it in small things. Interdependence is not an exception, it's a habit of thought. If there's always someone there to put their finger on the knot you're tying, or asking you to hand them a pan when they're cooking, then it's easier to ask for help when life throws you a curve. But when we are all trying to act fiercely independent, we'd rather buy yet another snow blower than borrow from our neighbor, especially when we know our neighbor is going to buy their own lawnmower rather than borrow ours.

So your takeaway for today, just in case you never get a chance to hear that other sermon on interdependence, is this. If you are stuck in independent thinking, then you may be counted among the sheep for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending the sick, visiting those in prison, giving drink to the thirsty, or welcoming in the stranger. But it is only when we come to understand interdependence, when we practice it daily so that we can use it to create God's distributive justice, that we will end the need for shelter meals and homeless hospitality centers.