

Sunday, July 4, 2021: Sermon Given by Rev. Kennedy

Sent with Only Staff and Story

Mark 6:1-13

We come again to the Fourth of July, and to complicate matters, on Sunday. First, happy Independence Day. I hope you have a wonderful day of celebration. I favor celebrating with bar-b-que shrimp grilled on the natural gas grill on skewers of six large shrimp each and plates piled with corn on the cob, potatoes, and baked beans topped with bacon.

On Independence Day, 2021, I declare that we are free. My concern is whether we realize that we are a free people on the understanding of freedom rooted in the Bible. Not free to do as we please. Not free to say what we please that is hurtful to others. Not free to lord it over others. But free, in the name of Jesus, to be the people of Jesus.

Politically, and these days, even Christians seem to think politically rather than theologically, once a free people participated in power together for the common good. A free people took responsibility for the well-being of others. This is not what is happening now. “Instead of participating in power, the virtual citizen is invited to have opinions.” (Sheldon Wolin). Political campaigns are not about substantive issues, but manufactured personalities, empty rhetoric, sophisticated public relations, slick advertising, propaganda, and the constant use of focus groups and polls to loop back to voters what they want to hear. Money has effectively replaced the vote. Opinion has replaced action. Raising hell has replaced positive work. We are not members of a representative government but a “misrepresentative government.”^[i]

Freedom has been cut loose from its biblical and political foundations. It no longer means what it once meant. And that is dangerous for us all.

Here are some samples from the New Testament of biblical freedom: “Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special

privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion” (*The Message*). “Don’t lord it over others but be a slave of all.” “I am a slave of righteousness.” “I am not my own, I have been bought with a price.” This is the freedom of faith.

I’m no longer confident that freedom junkies have any sense of what it would mean to be bought with a price. We are more likely to think that being free and feeling good is all that matters in the USA. Politics and faith have devolved into emotions/affects. The evangelical political machine is churning out affects. What would we do if we had more freedom than we have? People go where they please, do what they please now. If they don’t like the preacher, they go to a new church. If they don’t like the truth, they pick an alternative truth. We live at a point in history where the demand for individual freedom has never been stronger – or more potentially dangerous.^[ii]

I’m telling you the whole country has gone liberal. “Though claiming to represent a conservative form of Christianity the religious right is politically a form of Protestant liberalism,” because of its American nationalism. The alleged divide between conservatives and liberals is an illusion – the whole country’s gone liberal in the name of an alleged freedom that makes slaves of us all.

I fear the freedom preachers in America. I fear the churches having Fourth of July services with fireworks in their cavernous cathedrals, political firebrands making nationalistic speeches, and hyper-patriotic music. I fear these false prophets and patriots in their souped-up freedom. These free people smack of an emerging fascism and an “inverted totalitarianism.”^[iii] (Wolin). The vaunted freedom bandied about in the USA is an illusion. We are the most conformist people in the world. In the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*, the crowd repeats, altogether, like robots, the refrain, “We are all individuals.” Americans pick their tribe and proceed to all be the same as each other. Dogmatic, boring, contrarian hyper-individualists with a fixed set of beliefs are resistant to rational discussion.

This strange notion of freedom has led us to notions like “truthiness” and “alternative truths” and “My opinion is as good as yours.” It has culminated in an anonymous figure in social media known only as “Q.” When I first heard that evangelicals were excited about Q, I was amazed. I couldn’t believe that evangelicals were embracing the Q Hypothesis of New Testament scholars.^[iv] They have always detested Q. A bit of background about Q: The Q hypothesis explains the large amount of material, roughly 230 verses, common to

Matthew and Luke that is not found in or derived from the Gospel of Mark. This, most believe, points to a common, although unknown, source. This is what scholars label as Q.

I was really excited that evangelicals were in love with New Testament scholarship and then one of my friends, a social media guru, told me, “No, no, Rod. Not that Q. This is QAnon.” I am easily fooled at times.

QAnon is an online conspiracy theory that claims there’s a deep state of Democratic elites and Hollywood stars who are pedophiles, Satan worshipers, and cannibals. QAnon started with an anonymous post on a message board said extradition agreements had been struck with several countries "in case of cross border run" by Hillary Clinton. (That run still hasn't happened.) Twenty-five percent of evangelicals embrace QAnon. Even evangelical pastors are alarmed. Russell Moore, one of America's most respected evangelical Christian thinkers, says he's 'talking literally every day to pastors, of virtually every denomination, who are exhausted by these theories blowing through their churches or communities.'"

There’s a world of difference between Q as a collection of the sayings of Jesus and Q a mysterious social media guru spreading conspiracy. I really wish my evangelical brothers and sisters would take the sayings of Jesus more seriously. A book that contains just the hard sayings of Jesus would be a great place for churches to begin to rediscover the truth that is Jesus. This much is clear: I believe in the sayings of Jesus; I don’t believe in the postings of QAnon. Life is getting crazy in the home of the brave and the land of the free, and even crazier when evangelical Christians choose Q over Jesus.

American notions of freedom are at odds with the gospel of Jesus. False freedom mocks the cross of Jesus, crowds out the value of truth, reduces the importance of the teachings of Jesus, and disrupts the heart of Christian faith. Hyper-individualism makes a shambles of any hope of being the “body of Christ.” People end up with voluntaristic and contrarian thinking just for the sake of it. They end up believing simply what they WANT to believe. And if they don’t want to believe the truth, they deny the truth, reject the truth. There are things that are true that we don’t want to accept and then it is a matter of the will and not the mind. It is hard to will oneself to accept things that are true that one doesn’t want to believe. I suppose some of you have some rock-hard beliefs, moss-covered, lifelong beliefs that you wouldn’t change even if Jesus appeared to you on a Damascus Road. It takes strength and submission to reality and truth to be free and that is exactly the

problem, isn't it? In the New Testament, one man tries to evade the truth that was Jesus by asking the philosophical question, "What is truth?" Now, an entire nation of Pilate's sing "What is truth?" as they trample over it. "The truth, of course, is that the Father has sent his Son so that we – that is, the church – might be an alternative politics, a politics of truth, to that of the world. The world's politics is based on violence; kill or be killed; when people screw you, screw them back fifteen times as hard. That is the politics undone by the death and resurrection of Jesus. A people have been created by the Holy Spirit to be an alternative politics to the politics of the lie – lies so blatant that we believe they must be true as otherwise they are so absurd. Lies that lead us to believe that we can be free on our own to do as we please.[v] The only true freedom comes from the truth. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

The truth is contained in the Christian story. After all, Christians are a people who have a story. The fake freedom of feeling good has made us a people with no story. Did you know that a language dies when there are no speakers of that language left? A language dies every 14 days in our world. I believe that the language that is Christianity is in danger of dying. We are becoming a people with no story. A story requires a language and Christianity is a language. And a story requires storytellers. Christians have lost the ability to speak Christian "just to the extent they identify Christian speech with what they call 'freedom.'" Nothing gives Christians attempting to speak Christian as much trouble as saying "Jesus." Jesus has mostly disappeared from conversations outside of church. Most Christians are bi-lingual. We speak Christian in church; we speak "world" in the culture.

But Jesus "sent" his disciples – sent them out into the world. And he sent them only with a staff and a story. Do not let the world around you intimidate you into not speaking Christian, not speaking of Jesus. Paul's advice to Timothy remains potent for us. "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

"Learning to say 'God' requires that I learn to acknowledge that I am a 'dependent rational animal.'" Learning to say "Jesus" requires that I learn not to be afraid or embarrassed at what the culture thinks of my language. Learning to say "Holy Spirit" requires that I learn to acknowledge that I can't do the work of storyteller in my own power.

What happened to our story? A different story – the American story – has replaced our story. America has conquered Christianity and liberals and conservatives are equally to blame. We have been assimilated to the secular culture. The churches that most Americans attend do little to challenge the secular presumptions that form their lives. We have become a people who have no story and believe we are free to choose our own story. This is what Americans means by “freedom.” Freedom becomes making a choice between consumer products or political candidates or television shows. Freedom becomes a Toyota or a Chevrolet; a Sony or Samsung; AT&T or Verizon; Democrat or Republican. Freedom becomes a choice between believing or not believing the truth. Freedom becomes a choice of not believing history or science. “Somebody’s got to stand up to these experts,” is the rally cry.^[vi] Freedom, instead of a mountain of responsibilities, becomes a series of consumer choices, a list of opinions.

And Jesus sent the Twelve, that is the Church, out into the big, bad world with no bag, no shoes, no money, no bread, and no overcoat. He told them to tell his story that all should repent. He instructed the Church to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against the politics of this world. I love this act of resistance – throwing dust in the face of the world as courageous storytellers. In case, the church missed the lesson, Jesus repeats the “sending out” with seventy others. He sent them out as lambs into the midst of wolves. This is our remarkable freedom – the freedom to stand up to the world and proclaim the gospel and to have the audacity to protest that world and the confidence that Jesus spoke truth when he said that those who reject the story will face a greater judgment than Sodom. Only telling the story of Jesus will save us now.

In the next five or so decades, the only churches that will survive are those that hold on to Jesus’ story, even though it puts them in fundamental opposition to mainstream American culture. The Catholics are in as much trouble as the rest of us. Catholics in America know they do not belong, which is why they are so determined to demonstrate that they are more American than the Americans. The Catholic bishops in the USA are passing out prohibitions to the Eucharist as a political ploy to show that they have deserted the open table of our Lord.^[vii] How Protestant! The Protestants, always believing that America was a Protestant land, are determined to show that they are super-patriots. The bell tolls for Christianity in America and we are the generation called to either arrange the funeral or participate in the renewal to faithful life.

The streets, the litter-filled streets, with all the lonely people, calls for a faithful church. We are commanded to be a people of the street. Our gospel was written in the everyday, common street language of the Greeks, and the church has to return to those same dusty streets, or they will be shoveling clods of dirt over our casket. This is “crunch time” for the church.

One thing we have going for us: We are still a church that bears the name of Jesus. We are to speak the name of Jesus in public places. How will we ever muster the courage for this audacious action? I am not sure I have the answer, but I do think I know where we need to begin. Instead of bantering on about freedom and patriotism, we can speak Christian in the public spaces. There’s a terrible loneliness stalking the public venues of America – the malls, the stadiums, the racetracks, the casinos (especially the casinos), the movie theatres, and the like. And we have the story – the really big story and that is the good news the world is dying to hear.

I call upon EFC to go against the grain of the culture. I don’t want you to be liberal. I don’t want you to be conservative. I want you, I want us, to be the storytellers of Jesus. I want you to help me challenge the reigning ethos of the world. It requires submission to the teachings of Jesus – to embrace his story, live his story, and tell his story. As free people, let us get on with the storytelling.

[i]The people are not invited to share the power. The power resides with the corporate giants and political elites. Trivial political discourse is used to fire up the bases, to leave the public fragmented, angry, and emotionally charged. Political rallies, designed to make voters feel good, are not expressions of actual political power. It is a show and nothing more. (For more on this topic, see Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy, Inc* and Cornell West, *Democracy Matters*).

[ii]Rupert Read, “What Is New In Our Time? The Truth in Post-Truth,” Nordic Wittgenstein Review Special Issue, 2019: 81 – 96). And you can blame this on the liberals. They started us on this road with John Rawls’s proposed indifference to others’ conceptions of the good (Read, 2017). You hear it in the slogans we use: “Who am I to judge another Christian? We are all sinners.” “It is up to each of us to do the best we can by loving one another. What I eat, and with whom I sleep, therefore, is my business as long as I do not hurt anyone.” “To be a Christian is not to get hung up on moralistic judgments.” (*Working with Words*). Liberals – the whole lot of us. Even conservatives are liberals now. Listen to conservative

slogans: “My opinion is just as good as yours.” “How dare you interfere in my right not to wear a mask?” “Who do these science and history experts think they are?” “How dare you interfere in my company’s right to pollute the land and deny climate change?”

Liberals the lot of us. Liberal political philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that we should be free to do as we like without impediment from our fellow creatures “so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong.”

[iii] Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*.

[iv] See Marcus Borg and Thomas Moore, *The Lost Gospel Q: The Original Sayings of Jesus* and John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus*.

[v] Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words*, 122.

[vi] Randall J. Stevens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age*, 3. Quote is from Don McLeroy, chairman of the Texas State Board of Education. He also said, “I disagree with these experts.” Later he admitted that his source was his niece who was a first-year graduate student at Harvard.

[vii] Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.