

Date: July 4, 2004

SUNDAY: Ordinary 14

SERMON: Interdependence Day

Text(s): 2 Kings 5:1-15; Galatians 6:7-10; Luke 10:1-12

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One of the things that America and France share in common is that both countries celebrate their national independence days in the month of July. But like most things that we share with the French, our celebrations are somewhat the same, but in other ways, very different.

In the summer of 1997, we got to experience both celebrations in the same year. We had taken our home leave that year so that we were back in the U.S. over the 4th of July, but arrived back in France in time for Bastille Day on the 14th, the day the French remember the storming of the Bastille and the beginning of their own Revolution which overthrew the monarchy and established the Republic. (Some of us who are a bit more cynical about these things think that they still have a monarchy, but have simply changed the titles to protect the guilty.)

So that year, we celebrated the 4th like Americans typically do— with a big extended family picnic, games in the yard with the nieces and nephews, and in the evening, full of hamburgers and potato salad, we went up to the local township park to watch the fireworks. The 4th of July here in the U.S. is usually a pretty laid-back affair— lots of local parades, family picnics, pickup softball games or trips to the beach, and small-scale fireworks, kids setting off mostly illegal firecrackers. The tone of the whole celebration is peaceful, recreational, and family-oriented.

But the tone of Bastille day is very different. Instead of local parades of fire trucks and floats made by Girl Scout troops or Little Leaguers and high school marching bands, the parade is a display of France's military might with tanks and self-propelled howitzers and flyovers by every plane in the French inventory, along with

every national service unit from all the civilian and military uniformed services marching down the Champs Elysees with the Arc de Triomphe in the background. All this is followed by solemn political speeches by the President of the Republic and others extolling France's liberty from the tyranny of kings and her self-appointed role as a guardian of republican ideals and human rights. In the evening, hundreds of thousands of people gather on the Champs de Mars near the Eiffel Tower for a a sound and light show combined with fireworks that year after year outdoes anything we've ever seen in sheer technical virtuosity.

It may be just personal prejudice on my part, but on the whole, I prefer the backyard barbecues and family softball games. Although I must admit that nobody does fireworks better than the French.

Independence is something we cherish. Not only political independence which we celebrate on our respective national holidays, but independence in every area of life. The rugged individualist is part of the national self-image in both countries, nurtured as we are from our school days on the writings of people like Thomas Paine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay "Self-Reliance," glorifies the notion of "standing on our own two feet," forging our own way in the world, relying on our wits and our hard work to get ahead. I don't know whether that quintessentially Yankee essay is still required reading in with school curriculums these days— but it had its effect on generations of Americans, and that spirit of personal independence still has deep roots even today. We don't like being beholden to other people. Even into old age, when infirmity or illness begins to take its toll, we cling fiercely to our independence. Those of us with aging parents or those of you who are aging parents know how much we cherish our independence, and insist on living on our own as long as we possibly can, and even beyond the point at which we can care for ourselves.

While I prize our political and personal

independence as highly as anyone, it seems to me a greater part of wisdom to recognize that any independence we have or experience in this life is a secondary, derivative thing. The reality of our situation is that none of us is truly independent. None of us is totally autonomous. None of us stands alone. Every one of us, whether we know it or not, is radically interdependent. While we may take our cues from Emerson on *Self-Reliance*, we also learned from poet John Donne that *No Man is an Island*. And we are learning, sometimes painfully, as in our present circumstances, that no nation is an island either. The plain fact is that we were never created to be completely independent. In the creation stories of Genesis, which still provide us with the fundamental beginning point for our faith, we hear the Creator saying, “It is not good for the human to be alone; I will create a helper for him.” And from that divine creative will springs not only other human beings, but the whole interdependent created order— plants and animals and ecosystems. Married women understand this need for a helper very well; they know their husbands could never survive on their own if they weren’t around to respond to that daily cry for help, “Honey, I can’t find my socks.”

That truth of our interdependence is emphasized in all of our lessons this morning. Our Old Testament lesson, which is set in a time when the ancient Near East was comprised of tribal confederacies that were more or less constantly in a state of rivalry or outright warfare with each other— sort of like today in fact. There were no modern nation-states with boundary lines drawn neatly on a map, of course, but there were distinct nations— confederations of tribes sharing common ethnicity and culture often competing for the same land and the same scarce water supplies. I don’t think they’d started to fight over oil yet, but that would come in due time.

In this case, it is the confederacy of Aram in modern-day Syria, that appears to have the

upper hand in its rivalry with the tribal confederacy of ancient Israel. Namaan is the Aramean warlord who has been raiding Israelite villages. In one of those raids had captured a young woman whom he took back to his own village and gave her to his wife to be her personal servant.

But Namaan has a problem. He’s got a skin condition that, while it doesn’t stop him from raiding Israelite settlements, does make life miserable. The writer calls it leprosy, but in the Old Testament, leprosy is a catch-all term for any condition where the skin has open sores or scaling or flaking. Could have been eczema or the “heartbreak of psoriasis,” for all we know, but whatever it was, it was a real pain.

One day while he’s complaining to his wife about this, his wife’s servant girl overhears and so when she’s alone with her mistress, she says, “*If only my lord were with the prophet in Samaria, he could be cured.*”

Well, when Namaan hears this, he goes in to tell his king or tribal chieftain about it, and so the king, because he values Namaan’s military leadership, agrees to provide him with an elaborate gift or bribe to buy off the king of Israel and get him to allow Namaan to consult the prophet Elisha.

So in good time, after some initial confusion when the king of Israel thinks he’s being asked to cure this man, fearing that his inability to do so will only serve as a pretext for another attack by the Arameans, Namaan eventually ends up talking to Elisha the man of God. Or rather, not exactly talking to him, for Elisha doesn’t even deign to speak to him personally. He sends his valet Gehazi to this enemy commander (which of course is a calculated insult) and tells Namaan to go wash seven times in the Jordan and he’ll be clean.

Namaan is duly insulted, and gets both his personal and his patriotic dander up. “What, no magic wand, no magical incantations, no hocus-

pocus and ceremony? The healer doesn't even come out to speak to me? Doesn't he know who I am? And as for washing in that miserable little trickle of water they call the Jordan River, aren't the Abana and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?"

But his own servants can see where all this wounded ego and nationalistic pride are leading; they're the ones who are going to have to fight under Namaan's leadership after all, so they come and say, "Look, what's it going to hurt to do what the prophet says? What have you got to lose except a little bit of face?" After their intervention, Namaan's cooler judgment prevails, and he goes and dips himself in the Jordan seven times, and voilá! he is cured of his leprosy.

So Namaan learns an important lesson; he might be the most powerful warrior on the scene, but he can't heal himself. Rugged independence will not get him the help he needs; recognition of his interdependence will. He can tug on his own bootstraps all he wants, but he'll still have leprosy. From a captured slave girl, he learns that the solution to his problem is with his enemy. His enemy has something that he needs, but which he can only get, not by conquest, but by humbly accepting it as a gift. And he also learns, as Elisha intends that he should, that this strange God that the Israelites worship has power that is much greater than his own gods, to whom he has no doubt prayed and sacrificed as well. So his healing becomes a divine revelation to him as well as a transformation of his condition.

But it is not only Namaan who learns about interdependence in this story. Elisha learns this salutary truth as well. Israel's God, whose prophet Elisha is, is not the God of Israel alone, nor does his favor and divine help extend to Israel alone. God cares for every human being because all people are created in God's image, whether they know it or not, whether they know the God of Israel or not. No nation, no people, no individual has an exclusive claim on God. The claim runs the other way; it is God who has

claims on us. Elisha understands, however grudgingly, that God has sent Namaan to him, and that he must respond with hospitality, even if that hospitality is arrogantly requested and insultingly offered. Elisha has to recognize that he and Israel are God's people by God's choice, not by their own merits or deserving. And that means that they have a relationship of interdependence with every other people, even their sworn enemies.

It's good to remind ourselves of that truth on this occasion of our own celebration of our independence from authoritarian rule. As Americans, we always, I think, have to guard against the temptation to believe our own hype, to believe that we are a self-made people, self-reliant, who can merrily go our own way, creating our own future, being rugged individualists who make our own destiny. That image may well for politicians in electoral campaigns or car dealers who want to sell us the biggest and most powerful and fastest vehicles made, but it doesn't lead us anywhere constructive. In fact, as we're learning all too painfully, it actually decreases the independence we have and makes us more dependent on the actions of others.

Do we value liberty and freedom from tyranny? Of course? Have we fought and died for it? Yes, and would again. Can we get along without anyone else's help or cooperation? Absolutely not. Do we need other peoples, other nations, even the strange gifts our enemies may have to offer. Beyond doubt we do.

St. Paul, in admonishing the Galatians to stop their internal feuding with one another, reminds them that God has created and ordered the world in such a way that we reap what we sow. And he further reminds them that what they are supposed to be sowing is actions and behavior which "*work for the good of all, and particularly for those of the household of faith.*" Working for the common good is God's will, and if the goal of our behavior and our action is not the good of all, there can be no good at all for

anyone.

When Jesus sends out his disciples out “*as sheep in the midst of wolves,*” to proclaim the Kingdom of God, he forces them to recognize their radical interdependence on the very people to whom they are sent— depending on the hospitality of the “wolves” for their very survival.

In a time when our own body politic is fractured by deep divisions and tensions, in a time when our world is fractured by fratricidal violence and deep chasms of economic inequity, we, as the people of God are called to both offer and receive hospitality, to work for the common good, to be reminders of God’s claims on us and of God’s love that sends rain on the just and unjust alike. If we Christians can offer such a model of interdependence to our nation and to our world, even to our enemies, then perhaps the promise of freedom we celebrate today will become more than political rhetoric or a marketer’s dream. It will become again, as it was for our founders, a vision of hope for the whole world.