

Date: July 9, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 14

SERMON: Dependence Day

Text(s): 2 Samuel 7:1-25

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We missed the Fourth of July celebrations this year— no hamburgers and potato salad, no outdoor games, and no fireworks. But we got to visit our younger daughter in Ghana, and have some extremely interesting new experiences and encounters there, followed by catching up with old friends in Paris, where we got to see France beat Portugal in the semi-finals of the World Cup, so I suppose that's adequate consolation.

When we lived in France my job at the American Church got us on the American embassy's list of people who got invited to the ambassador's residence on the Fourth of July for the annual garden party— along with about 2000 other people, a mixture of Americans and French. Apart from the Marine color guard and someone who sang "The Star-Spangled Banner," and the ambassador giving a short speech about the revolutions our two countries fought to win our independence, it was a pretty tame affair. Mostly it was just an occasion for French and American business people and diplomatic types to mingle, drink cocktails and munch on dainty finger foods laid out on long tables or distributed by white-jacketed and white-gloved servers circulating through the crowd.

There were, however, two quintessential American touches to the whole affair. They always had tucked away in one corner, a freezer full of several flavors of Ben and Jerry's ice cream— a very popular attraction for the Americans in the crowd— and the other, a demonstration that Ambassador Pamela Harriman had a sly sense of humor. Some of those white-jacketed servers were carrying around large platters of McDonald's Chicken McNuggets, each with a little toothpick stuck in it for dipping into the sauces that McDonald's supplies. Sipping fine French champagne while downing a Chicken McNugget dipped in

barbecue sauce is an unforgettable Independence Day experience.

Ghana, which was the first sub-saharan African colony to gain its independence in 1957, marked the occasion by constructing an enormous arena and a monumental arch topped with a Black Star just off the beach in Accra. Mass rallies, concerts, and public celebrations are held there. Independence is something that those who have it celebrate, and those who do not, long for. Despite the poverty we encountered in some of the parts of Ghana that we saw, there was an irrepressible optimism among the people there, a sense that while they might face formidable economic hurdles, they had the political and personal freedom to attack those hurdles head-on with a *joie de vivre* it would be hard to imagine for anyone from a country of such material abundance as ours. But there was an essential difference in the Ghanaian attitude toward their status as a free nation and that of other nations, like ours, which have been free for a much longer time: There was a much greater recognition of how ultimately dependent and interdependent they are on one another.

Many of us grew up in an era when reading Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" was required for every high school student. (Perhaps it still is; I don't know.) The rugged Yankee individualist is a cherished part of the self-image of many Americans, particularly from this area of the country. "Standing on our own two feet," forging our own way in the world, relying on our wits and our hard work to get ahead, and "grabbing all the gusto we can" in the process is an image that many of us prize. Even into old age, when infirmity or illness begins to take its toll, we cling fiercely to our individualistic understanding of our independence. We insist on "doing for ourselves" as long as we possibly can, and sometimes even longer than we possibly can, and then we make problems for our children who are trying to do their filial duty by us and provide for our care. But we will be independent. We feel ashamed or demeaned if we have to depend on someone else, if our own powers are not

sufficient to cope with the situation in which we find ourselves.

I'm not really sure, however, that Emerson did us any favors with that essay on Self-Reliance. While I prize independence as highly as anyone, it seems to me that one of the most urgent needs all of us have is to learn a proper dependence. In fact, we may never experience true independence until we learn that we are fundamentally dependent and interdependent. The reality of our situation is that none of us is truly independent. None of us is autonomous. None of us stands alone. Every one of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, is radically dependent. And that's really what we celebrate on our national Independence Day—the sacrifices, efforts, achievements, and struggles that others went through to give us the freedoms and independence that we enjoy. We are dependent on their work.

This is a lesson that even kings have to learn, it seems. King David, as we see in our lesson for today, had a thing or two to learn about the relationship between dependence and independence.

For Jews and Christians King David is a figure who is larger than life. For Jews, he is the archetype of kingship, the one who took a rag-tag, loose confederation of ethnically-related tribes and welded them into a strong nation, setting the stage for his son Solomon to grow the nation into an empire. For Christians, he is the ancestor of Jesus, the Messiah, as we sing at Christmas, *“Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son,”* or

*“To you in David's town this day
is born of David's line,
a Savior who is Christ the Lord,
and this shall be the sign.”*

Archaeologists and biblical historians agree for the most part that David was an important leader of ancient Israel and something of a military genius, though hardly the world-

renowned figure portrayed in the biblical writings, and certainly not a magnificent ruler of a large and powerful kingdom. The royal chroniclers who wrote the books of Samuel and Kings in our Old Testament, did a very good job of retrospective glorification. But to a modern historian, he looks more like the paramount chief of a tribal confederation than anything like the royal family of Great Britain. Yet the stories we have about him, inflated by pious memory as they are, are fascinating and important ones for both Jewish and Christian identity.

We pick up the story this morning after David has come through some years of struggle and has succeeded in unifying the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. He's conquered the neighboring Jebusite tribe and has occupied their hilltop city of Jerusalem and made it his new capital. He's survived plots against his life by his predecessor King Saul, political intrigue among his captains, and the wars with other tribal groups. Now he sits in a new palace which he has built in Jerusalem, and he sees that the Ark of the Covenant, that symbol of God's presence among the people and the reminder of God's covenant with them, is still residing in a tent rather than in a permanent sanctuary.

So David decides he'd better build a house for God, a temple in which to house the Ark of the Covenant and the stone tablets of the Law which it contains. It's the gesture of a man secure in his independence. He's fought his battles and won, he has rest from all his enemies round about, he's going to kick back and relax now, but he does want to show his gratitude for the help God has given him, so he's going to build God a house. The building of religious temples was a common act of ancient rulers, and it often was a genuine act of worship on the part of the king, but it also sent a political message, establishing the notion that this king was favored by God and therefore that he ruled by divine right.

God, however, has other ideas, as God often does. Through the prophet Nathan, God sends a message to David that, in effect says, "You're going to build me a house? Did you forget where you came from? I took you from the pasture, from herding sheep to be the shepherd of my people Israel, and I'm the one who has been with you wherever you've gone, and who has defeated all your enemies before you. You didn't get to where you are now by yourself. No, you won't build me a house; I'll build you a house--a dynasty that will endure forever. When you're dead and gone, I'll raise up your descendent after you and establish the throne of his kingdom."

Well, David does appear to want to be God's man at heart, so he takes the prophet's word to heart, and his prayer is his reply to this rather two-edged message from God, a message that is at once a stinging rebuke and a stunning promise.

Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? . . . Because of your own promise and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. Therefore, you are Great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you and there is no God besides you. . . . And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you.

What a beautiful acknowledgment of David's recognition of his fundamental dependence. While David was in the thick of his battles with his enemies, dealing with internal political intrigues, working night and day to establish his sovereignty and unify the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, it would have been the most natural thing in the world for him to come to believe that his own skill, his own wisdom, his own power had enabled him to achieve his goals. But now that he has the time to contemplate and

reflect on where he's come from, where he's been, and where he's going, he sees that at every turn, God has been there before him. And his greatness as a king is precisely in his recognition that there is Someone greater on whom he has been radically dependent all along. His closing plea for God to confirm his promise and bring it to fulfillment is a study in humility. If David's throne is to be established forever, he recognizes that it will be God's doing and not his own.

That's a lesson that's so difficult for us to learn, isn't it? I think it's particularly difficult for Americans. We prize the image of "the self-made man." We cherish the sense of independence that our material possessions give us. Don't get me wrong; I'm not knocking hard work and responsible and prudent accumulation of resources. But there's always a temptation for us to sit back like David after he had overcome all obstacles and forget where we came from and how we got here. We're tempted to say, "Look at what I've accomplished through my own hard work and a few lucky breaks." We forget that we could never have gotten to where we are without the help of many, many other people. We forget that our independence is the product of a deeper and more fundamental dependence.

When Lyndon Johnson was President, Bill Moyers was his special assistant. As many of you know, Moyers had been a Baptist minister in East Texas before entering politics, and once at a White House state dinner, LBJ asked Bill Moyers to say grace. Moyers began to pray in that rather soft-spoken voice of his, and right in the middle of his prayer, President Johnson loudly said, "Speak up Bill." Without lifting his head or looking over at LBJ, Moyers said, "I wasn't talking to you, Mr. President."

Even presidents need to be reminded every once in awhile that their writ only runs so far. We are not sovereign, and for two good reasons: in the first place none of us is qualified, and in the second, the job is already taken.

The fact that we're dependents rather than sovereigns is why there can be no such thing as private religion or private Christianity. To be a Christian is to be in a community of interdependence. Our dependence upon God is given concrete expression in our relationships with each other. The reconciliation of the world begins with the reconciliation of individuals in a reconciled community. Acknowledging our dependence upon God inevitably draws us into a relationship of interdependence with others. Once we admit that we are not sovereign, then we destroy any basis we have for "going it alone." We become responsible for one another, accountable to one another, dependent upon one another.

That recognition of God's sovereignty and our own deep dependence is the engine that drives the Christian church's sense of mission as well. It's what sends us out beyond the walls of our church buildings to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and care for the sick and visit the prisoners and demand justice for the poor. When we recognize that we are not the true builder of the house we live in, but rather we live in the house God has graciously built for us, then we also recognize the debt that we owe to others. As St. Paul put it, "*I am a debtor to everyone for the sake of Christ.*" When we acknowledge that we are the recipients of God's unmerited grace and care, we become obligated to extend such care to others. All our achievements, all our possessions, all our cherished independence fall into proper perspective as the graces they are. And so we are moved by gratitude to extend those graces to others.