

14th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”

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Did you have a good 4th of July? I hope you did. I enjoyed celebrating the 4th of July with my sister’s family on the beach at Ocean Shores. And it was a perfect evening, gorgeous sunset, beach fire, s’mores, and the kids had a wonderful time lighting off the fireworks. As you looked up and down the beach that evening, you could see hundreds of other families doing the same thing. It was quite the display. From what I saw exploding in the air around me, I believe the Native American economy is doing quite well!

The real heroes that night on the beach at Ocean Shores were all the police and firefighters driving up and down the beach reminding everyone to be safe. They were sacrificing their holiday that they could have been spending with their families so to keep a presence on the beach. And this is an important contribution because every year somebody out of the thousands that are down there can get hurt or out of hand. You see when it comes to fireworks on the beach on the 4th of July, the value we celebrate of the pursuit of happiness can at times be at odds with the values of life and liberty.

Of course, the 4th of July marked our nation’s 242nd anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The most famous sentence in this declaration is, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” As we all know, this was written after a culmination of events which included King George of Britain denying the colonies these basic rights as the Declaration goes on to describe.

What I find interesting is that the rights of life, liberty and happiness are not listed alphabetically. As such, they seem to be suggesting an obvious hierarchy of values. The value of life is placed first because you can’t very well have liberty and the pursuit of happiness unless you are alive to enjoy them. Liberty is next because you cannot pursue happiness without the freedom to do so. And the word happiness is prefaced with the word pursuit because it isn’t the government’s role to provide happiness but rather to ensure a system of governance whereby happiness can be reasonably pursued by the governed, so far so good.

The values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in the declaration are unalienable rights from the signers’ point of view because these rights come from God. We are endowed these rights by our Creator. They are, of course, not absolute rights because everyone has different life spans, laws are necessary to restrict freedom for the common good, and happiness is subjective and dependent on personal choices. In the declaration, however, it is important to recognize that the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness find their context in God, as does the right to declare independence as a new country. And the three unalienable rights are placed in correct hierarchical order precisely because of their context to the Creator in that famous sentence of our founding document.

And so, what happens when you take the Creator out of this sentence from the Declaration of Independence? The hierarchy of values can become flipped on its head in a dangerous way when God is replaced by our egotistic wants. The pursuit of happiness can become retranslated into a hedonistic value that can become even more important than the values of life and liberty. And we see this play out in our experience, on our city streets at times, and in our readings this Sunday. Let's take a look.

In our first reading, we have the prophet Ezekiel. Because he is a man of God, his values are in proper order. God had given him the gifts of life and liberty. Now look to how he defined his happiness. He defined his happiness by doing the will of God, which meant being sent to proclaim the word of God to the "hard of face" and "obstinate of heart". That is what the reading says. Now, I don't know about you, but from my perspective, there is nothing enjoyable about going into a room full of hard faces and obstinate hearts! How many of you have had to do this at work? How many of you kids have had to do this at school? How many times have you had to do this with family members, walking into a room to greet a hard face and obstinate heart? There is nothing enjoyable about this. If we define pursuing happiness as pursuing fun, the more hedonistic definition, then we might find ourselves not being happy in our workplace, at our school or in our homes or with our lives. If we define our pursuit of happiness like Ezekiel did as doing the will of God in whatever difficult circumstance we find ourselves in, we may have the grace to persevere through difficult situations, and over time be surprised that we are happier people for it. Follow?

We see this in our second reading as well. St. Paul is writing to the Corinthians who were an early Church community that were famous for fighting with each other. He writes, "That I Paul, might not become too elated, because of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this that it might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'" How about that? Power made perfect in weakness. Of course, scholars have long debated what on earth was this so called thorn in his flesh? Some have said he is referring to a speech impediment as there is some weak evidence that he might have been a stutterer. Some think he might have been prone to epileptic seizures. At the end of the day, who knows what form this "angel of Satan" manifested itself? But I think it is safe to say, every person in Corinth and every person here today (myself included) has something that qualifies as Paul's thorn in the flesh that keeps us humble.

We can be successful at so many things in life but there is that one thing in our life that is like a brick wall. It might be physical. It might be psychological. It might be spiritual. A hedonistic pursuit of happiness might contribute to the pain of this thorn in the flesh and then award you be giving you reasons to despair. Not for St. Paul, he roots his happiness in the love of God. This is why St. Paul is able to say, "I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me." How about that! With the love of Christ and the power of Christ crucified in the equation, weaknesses can be transformed into strengths! St. Paul found reason to be happy despite his trials because his happiness was rooted in Christ rather than his ego.

In our Gospel reading, even the Son of God isn't let off the hook. Like Ezekiel in our first reading, and St. Paul's experience with the Corinthians in our second reading, Jesus encounters a town filled with hard faces and obstinate hearts. It is a bit ironic that the most resistance Jesus would receive outside of Jerusalem would be in his own home town of Nazareth with the people he grew up with in his humanity. And this seems to happen in every household at times, doesn't it? Have you noticed how family members can be on their best behavior and model for politeness in the company of strangers only to return home and become really nasty to other family members? That is reflective of a more egotistic pursuit of happiness which only leads to misery. It happens all the time, and over time, can destroy families, communities and countries unless God is placed back into the equation of how we treat one another.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are so much more meaningful if we remember that God is the source of these blessings. In our Gospel reading, notice Jesus' sense of liberty and his pursuit of happiness was rooted in doing the will of his Father in heaven rather than the latest public opinion poll, even if this meant being persecuted, becoming our scapegoat, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In Jesus, we see power made perfect in weakness. Jesus' priorities in Nazareth were to provide the people there the opportunity for salvation. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

And so, as we clean up our yards after another 4th of July, we can ask ourselves, "What is our faith made of?" As we contemplate the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in our families, in our community, and in our country, how does God fit into the picture? Would it make a difference in how we treat our family members? Would it make a difference in how we treat our coworkers? Would it make a difference in how we treat our classmates, our politics, our most vulnerable in society, if God was ever more grounded in our understanding of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness rather than whatever seems to be paraded at any given moment in popular culture? It is good to be reminded that the culture in which we live cannot save us any more than the people of Nazareth can in our Gospel reading today. Only Jesus has the words of everlasting life. The Good news is: God wants to give us much, much more than life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. By giving us Jesus, God offers us the gifts of eternal life, spiritual liberty and therefore real happiness.