

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

July 3, 2022 – INDEPENDENCE DAY (*transferred from July 4*)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Independence or Interdependence?*”

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| Deuteronomy 10:17-21 | (Our God is mightier than any other and does great things) |
| Psalms 145:1-9       | (A song of praise exalting the Lord and His works)         |
| Hebrews 11:8-16      | (Abraham's faith lifted up as an example)                  |
| St. Matthew 5:43-48  | (Jesus teaches that we must love our enemies)              |

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In our society, “independent” is a word with almost universally positive connotations. As our children and grandkids grow up and take on more challenges by themselves, we praise their growing independence as evidence of maturity. Adults are proud to describe how this or that experience has made them more independent. Academics and intellectuals cherish their image of “independent thinkers.” And in the context of geopolitics, almost no other word carries the aura of victory, statehood, and sovereignty, more than the word “independent.” It’s grabbing the brass ring for would-be nations, a way to proclaim that one has finally arrived.<sup>1</sup>

July 4<sup>th</sup>, is, of course, characterized by that concept more than any of our other national commemorations, with possibly the exception of Juneteenth. Celebrated since 1866, June 19—or “Juneteenth”—is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. Considered the “longest running African-American holiday” it has been called “America’s second Independence Day.” This morning, for the Communion Solo, Rick will be playing “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” Often referred to as “The Black National Anthem,” this hymn was written as a poem by NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson in 1900. His brother, John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954), composed the music for the lyrics.<sup>2</sup>

God created all humans, black or white, slave or free, male or female, to be hardwired for community, to forge shared bonds of identity, and to observe rituals that reinforce our heritage. The commemorations we share throughout the year—whether civic, historic, or religious—help build and strengthen a cohesive community. They provide us with us a shared sense of pride and purpose, and help us to strive onward toward common goals and aspirations.

However, observing anything consistently without asking ourselves on a regular basis why we’re doing it can lead to diminished returns. So it is with Independence Day. We will find it a more meaningful and authentic commemoration if and when we take the time to unpack it first.

Independence Day marks the point at which the United States was able to break free of the rigid authority of the King of England in 1776. Unlike the reign of George the III, we look to Jesus for what benevolent authority looks like; Christ tells His disciples that true leaders are servants of one another.

If leaders are not prepared to be held accountable for their own authority and to experience the daily life of the community as a part of that governance, then something has gone very wrong. The American Revolution was a result, at least in part, of the chasm between the—in every sense of the word—distant rulers and their subjects. The Founding Fathers strove to close this gap, and to ensure that our government would not only be *for* the people, but *by* the people. As could be expected, their work was imperfect, but it is right that Independence Day should honor those noble sentiments. The fact that the Native communities already living here when the settlers arrived were not afforded the benefits of those ideals is, at best, an irony and at worst, a national disgrace.

In the Epistle reading appointed for today, the author of Hebrews talks about the Israelites settling the land of Canaan, which, by faith, they believed God had given them—it was, literally, the “promised land.” This is similar to many people’s view of the colonizing of America.

But we must take care not to read this letter as legitimizing the belief that any of us, whether individuals or communities, can just march in and take over someone else’s turf just because we want to. God has given the whole world into our care and we are all citizens of it, under *His* gentle and loving rule. We are not the owners of it, but the custodians. When God led the Israelites to the Promised Land, He did so on the understanding that custody of a place involves certain obligations.

Our first reading, from Deuteronomy, makes God’s law clear for those who would establish a nation: Welcome the stranger with love, feed and clothe them, and act with justice toward the weakest and most marginalized in that community (expressed in that reading as “widows and orphans”)

One of the most overlooked—but most important—parts of grammar is the preposition. What preposition should we insert after the word “independence”? We would probably say that we’re celebrating independence “from.” But what if, instead, we viewed it as independence “to”? Freedom is never just “freedom from,” it’s also “freedom to.”

In Galatians 5:1, St. Paul writes: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” As Christians, we have been set free *from* sin, and given freedom *to* live new lives in Christ.

Our Founding Fathers and Mothers did not simply want to be free from foreign rule, they also aspired to create a new way of being in community. They wanted to build a society that was more equitable and safeguarded against any one individual or division of government having too much power and influence. Our Independence Day celebrations should include a sober reflection on how, as a nation, we may have compromised those ideals in our time.

A question we would do well to ask ourselves is, “What does the word ‘independent’ actually mean?” Strip away from it all the positive connotations we listed earlier, and what are we left with? A stubborn individualism that doesn’t want to be dependent on anyone or anything. An isolationism that shuns interdependence with others. Suddenly the term loses its shine. If we act like it’s “my way or the highway”; if we fail to do unto others as we would have them do unto us; if we close our doors to the stranger, the poor, and the oppressed, then it’s a short step to closing our hearts and our minds to them.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus warns us about that kind of living: “If you love only the people who love you, you will get no reward. ... And if you are nice only to your friends, you are no better than other people. Even those who don’t know God are nice to their friends” (Matt. 5:46-47 NCV). Moreover, Jesus enjoins us to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good.” In other words, none of us is any better than anyone else, and since we are deserving of love, so is everyone else. What Jesus is teaching suggests that a culture of rugged individualism and prideful self-reliance can, when left unchecked, turn into a mistrust of, and even contempt for, and rejection of, others.

On the other hand, willing to be dependent on others—and on God—isn’t a sign of weakness or of compromise. It is a sign of strength, the ultimate sign that we trust another person (and God), and it recognizes that we are, in fact, the Body of Christ, where *everyone* is needed, with their gifts and specialties—as well as their idiosyncrasies and annoyances—in order for us to be complete. Our independence may have made us free, but our *interdependence* makes us whole.

So, on this year’s Independence Day, let us also think of it as “Interdependence Day”—a day when, as citizens of the United States of America, we celebrate not only being free from unjust foreign rule, but also, we commit ourselves anew to extending liberty and justice to everyone without partiality.

And, on Independence Day, let us, as believers in Christ, rejoice that He has set us free from sin without our having to shed a drop of blood in a revolution. Rather, it was Jesus who shed His blood and died *for us*, not only to liberate us from ourselves, the devil, hell, and death, but also to set us free to live in Him, with a peace, a joy, and a hope that not even a free nation can give us eternally.

I’d like to close with a humorous anecdote I couldn’t seem to work into the sermon. If and when you watch fireworks tomorrow, you’ll appreciate this one:

Opal Stout, from Cottageville, West Virginia, writes, “When the fireworks display began on the Fourth of July, my six-year-old nephew became so frightened by the explosions, I had to take him home. As we drove away, he declared, “I bet God is real mad at all those people shooting at Him!”<sup>3</sup>

Happy Fourth of July! And Blessed Freedom in Christ! *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Adapt., Nils Chittenden, “Interdependence Day, Independence Day 2013,” 4 July 2013, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org)

<<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/interdependence-day-independence-day-2013/>> 27 June 2022. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” [NAACP.org](https://naacp.org) <<https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing>> 28 June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Mark Eberly, “When The Fireworks Display Began On The Fourth,” 13 August 2007, Qtd. Opal Stout, “Kids of the Kingdom,” [The Christian Reader](https://www.christianreader.com), via [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com), <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/62786/children-by-mark-eberly>> 28 June 2022. Used with permission.