

“Faith and Freedom” (Galatians 6:1-16)
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San Dimas Community Church, UCC

The United Church of Christ was born out of the deep desire for faith and freedom. Those Pilgrims and Puritans of New England risked their lives to cross the ocean in search of a place to express their faith with freedom of conscience. They were joined with immigrants from Germany who sought the same. The history of our denomination is that of a refuge for all who find in us a place of faith and the freedom to live that faith truly and authentically. And so it is inherent within our church to allow others the freedom and space that we so dearly cherish for ourselves.

It's sometimes challenging when this extravagant welcome means we are called to welcome folks who are different from us and who join themselves to us. But we are bound together not because we are alike but because we are one in Christ and Christ's mission was that all may know the Creator's love.

The Rev. Donald Troast, a U.S. Navy captain and commander of U.S. submarine force chaplains tells a story about honoring the religious differences of those serving in the military. During a tour in Afghanistan...he returned to his quarters and found a hand-written note from an officer requesting a few minutes of his time. The officer, an Episcopalian, wanted to receive Holy Communion on the night before his troops were being sent into battle, yet the officer's unit chaplain was not comfortable serving him because of their denominational differences. Because in the UCC Holy Communion is open to everyone, Rev. Troast -- unlike some chaplains that come from more restrictive traditions -- was able to oblige. Troast said the man was afraid of making wrong decisions in combat that might result in the loss of life. He reassured the officer of his intellect, training, and the support of his soldiers. And then he served Holy Communion using the Book of Common Prayer, from the soldier's tradition. The UCC has 55 chaplains serving in the military and another 25 serve veterans and their families.

On this 4th of July, what makes me proud to be an American are those values of freedom of worship and the opportunity for people to thrive in wholeness and harmony with one another.

Our opening hymn, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, was written by the African-American poet, James Weldon Johnson, in the year 1900 to celebrate Lincoln's birthday. It was first sung by 500 Black school children in Jacksonville, Florida, and it later became known as the Negro National Hymn. It is a song of worship and praise. It is a song of remembrance, of faith and hope, and it is a hymn of challenge!

*God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light.
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

It is astonishing to realize that an African-American could write the words to this hymn in 1900 when our United States was so flawed with racial injustice. James Weldon Johnson was a faithful citizen and a person of faith.

In our history one goal has been equality, yet, history teaches us we have not always reached that goal. Even Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg recalls summer trips with her family

where signs were posted: “No Negroes or Jew welcome.” As an American and a person of faith, I can hold the goal of equality face-to-face with reality so that I can keep striving like Paul says: “not that I have attained it; but I keep pressing on towards the goal.” Or like Solomon Burke, preacher and songwriter, sings “None of us are free if one of us is chained -- none of us are free.”

Many people have sacrificed for the sake of our freedom. We’ve had Richard Harris on our prayer list as he fights cancer. Richard is a retired UCC clergy at Pilgrim Place. Richard is obsessively doing good things and nudging the rest of us to do the same. About 10 years ago on a day in June, I had a group of about 8 or 9 clergy over to my home for a clergy gathering and we were sharing what was going on in our lives and work. When it came time for Richard to share, he began to cry, and he told us that we were meeting on the anniversary of the Normandy invasion and that he had been on the beach that day. It had left indelible memories of the devastation of war. That day I understood what drove Richard to live a life of unceasing good deeds.

At 17, right after he graduated from high school, Richard enlisted in the navy. Besides landing at Normandy, he fought the war in the Pacific. He told me that everywhere he traveled, in every city, he saw that where shops and homes and schools and people should have been, there was nothing but devastation. The hell of war was scarred into his memory forever. When the war was over, Richard went to college and then Andover Newton Seminary and was ordained a United Church of Christ minister. He has spent the years since W.W. II doing anything and everything he could to work for a peaceful world. I asked him what it means to him to be a citizen and patriot and he said:

“I want my country to be admired and to be the best it can be, not militarily, not in wealth, but the best in moral leadership, the most loving.” He told me, that **“to be a true patriot means to speak out against your country when you believe it’s going the wrong way. I want my country to follow the teachings of Christ.”**

July 4th is a holiday for us to be grateful for our freedom, to feel very blessed to live in America, to honor those who have sustained this country, and to think about how we can sustain it and make it better in the future. A French philosopher of the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville, traveled across America. He wrote:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good. If America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

As people of faith and citizens of these United States, we are to continue to work to make America good. We honor our country not with eyes closed, but with eyes wide open, so that we can see the work ahead of us and rise to the challenges, just as those who’ve come before us have given themselves to do. May our faith direct us in all our daily lives so that the goodness of America will not be for the few but for the many.