

Celebrate Liberty Daily, Not Just on Independence Day

Though not a fan of the incessant fireworks going off for two weeks that bug Emmett and really, really scared Kirby, I've always loved Independence Day. Coming at a favorite time of year and going to see some fireworks after a BBQ is always fun, but for me the real impact of the day is that it is a reminder to me of how blessed I am to live in the Fruited Plain of the United States.

In seminary, we started by taking philosophy classes, and I remember a couple of the assignments I selected were to speak about Thomas Jefferson, a man who took freedom very seriously as the author of the Declaration of Independence, and the difference between the French Declaration of the Rights of Man as opposed to our Declaration of Independence. (I was a political science major at the U of M-Twin Cities, but instead of looking at a career working in politics a few weeks after graduation from the U I went right into seminary).

The key point from the talk and our discussion as a class was that what made our Declaration unique and what Jefferson got was how our rights come from God, not from man. "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...That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." These are powerful words. It's what led a group of people who were upset over tea and stamp taxes and taxation without representation to change the world.

Jefferson would also say: "When government fears the people, there is liberty. When the people fear the government, there is tyranny." I think today, more than ever, these words matter so much.

My concern as an American is many are losing sight of these words and what caused our nation to be born. In recent times, I've been greatly disturbed by the response of some governments across the world but also within our own country, especially at state and local levels to the pandemic and what this has meant for civil liberties. I've been equally bothered by social media censoring viewpoints those companies do not like, and by the rise of "cancel culture," which is quick to judge a person for something they said in the past or that isn't "woke" enough for modern times.

This is why I think more than ever today we as Americans need to have renewed appreciation for liberty. Independence Day is celebrated with fireworks because John Adams wrote his wife, Abigail, while at the Continental Congress, writing: "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary festival...It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more." We've done just that. But Independence Day for us in 2021 should not mean a quick run to Hudson to get the "good" fireworks and a good BBQ only. Rather it should remind us that our Founders figured it out: our rights come

from God, not the government. And we should celebrate them every day of our lives by not being afraid to live them out.

What does this look like today?

For one, we should refuse to be “canceled” by those who do not agree with us or are quick to judge. Note this does not mean we try to yell louder than they do or always fight fire with fire, or insult. But rather it does mean if someone judges us we should say, yes, there were mistakes I made in the past, how about that wooden beam in your own eye now that you’ve seen the splinter in mine? It also means we do not fear talking about our beliefs, no matter what they are. Be you liberal, conservative, Republican, Democrat, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, or whatever your faith or politics might be, do not fear offending others. And if they are, maybe that’s not a bad thing because it gives them something to think about. As I’ve said many times at Mass, as Catholics part of what we hold and teach will really bother people. Our moral teachings challenge; it’s why the media and some in culture will attack the faith for what we hold, but we aren’t doing what is just “politically correct.” Testifying to the truth can be quite counter cultural and we may be censored, attacked, and ridiculed. But it’s why the Founders took Freedom of Speech so seriously in the Bill of Rights. We need to tell the world what it needs to hear, not what it wants to hear.

Secondly, we should always think carefully when government takes actions that curtail liberties. As the pandemic started in March of 2020, we all saw varied responses from governments. In many places, businesses and churches and schools were closed. Others were less quick to do this; some places not “locking down” at all. Some locations required masks; others never had the requirement. Leaning more toward the libertarian position, meaning I really believe the individual should make whatever choice they feel is best for them, I was really disturbed as the days turned into weeks and weeks into months by some of what I saw going on. While with a new virus not fully understood there was a lot of fear, sadly I think some of this fear was used by some in power to give the people the impression they “knew what they were doing” and “in control.” I think we need to look at Covid and say “OK, what worked, what didn’t work” and honestly look at the data. The point is not so much about Covid so much as it is about the balance of liberty and the common good or the need of government to regulate and protect. We as citizens should question the government - remember that key part from Mr. Jefferson “consent of the governed.” Even in a pandemic (and there is no “pandemic clause” in the Constitution) just as you’d likely get a second opinion for a major surgery, we shouldn’t just nod and say “yes OK” when governments say we’re closing you down, we’re mandating masks, your school is closed, and be happy to get a stimulus check in the mail and that Netflix is available. This is what led for instance our own Archbishop and others to “lawyer up” when it seemed we might face extended closures and get us open at partial capacity last summer. Rather, in situations where government is encroaching on liberty, we should ask hard questions and demand media do their job to ask questions too no matter who is in office. Simply because Covid is waning a bit does not mean there may not be another pandemic, war, major national crisis - and from Covid to the Red Scare to Abolitionists standing up to government to say “all men are

created equal” does not just apply to whites, it takes citizens criticizing and being engaged in their government for liberty to be secured.

Third, talk about liberty to children. Our kids need to know how blessed we are to live in this country. Explain to them our history as a nation.

Fourth, try to be engaged in the issues, not just the emotion. We have such knee-jerk reactions these days to some things and get so polarized and angry. An argument isn't about yelling more loudly than your opponent. Rather we need to discuss issues as Americans and sometimes agree to disagree, but hopefully also find common ground and compromise.

Fifth, vote. Be engaged in your government. Write your councilmen, state representative or US Senator. Write a letter to the editor in the paper. Send them an email if you are concerned about an issue. Think about the issues that matter to you and express your opinion on them to people. No matter who is in office at any given time about half the people will be unhappy. But sometimes those who complain never get engaged and even worse never vote.

Lastly, try to see your neighbor as your fellow American and even more than that, your fellow human being created in God's image. Sadly with so much polarization we sometimes see our neighbors as our enemies. Try to be more tolerant and patient. Pray for those with whom you disagree. Try to rediscover discussing things. As I write this I'm at a priests conference on how we as people can find true happiness, and among the topics it was pointed out by our archbishop that many years ago the pastors of the most "liberal" and "conservative" parishes as they've come to be known were actually incredibly good friends. What a concept - people who are very different but also sharing a love of God and His Church coming together rather than tearing one another down. Maybe we can try to do the same thing.

What a blessing it is to live in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. Let's never take our freedom for granted, and by all means celebrate with some grilling and fireworks, but most of all remember what it is we celebrate - freedom - and live it out every day.

God bless America, and let freedom ring!

Fr. Paul