

Sermon Sunday 12 July 2009
Self Evident Truths
2Kings 2:1-2,6-14; Galatians 5:1,13-25
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Skit props: stool, low lectern, a quill pen, a bottle of ink, a towel for the servants arm.

Prayer: God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How many of you have been to the other Washington, Washington, D.C.? What was memorable about your visit? What was your favourite place? What monuments did you admire on and around the Mall? (*get to the Jefferson Memorial*).

Come with me back to a hot and humid night in late June two hundred and twenty three years ago to join Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776.

B.F. Tom, working so late? (*looks over Jefferson's shoulder to see what he's working at, and exclaims*) **Gadzooks, man! I thought you had finished. Are these the articles we are supposed to debate in the hall, tomorrow!**

T.J. I have not yet finished. I am putting the final touches on the title and preamble... How is this for a title? "The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America?"

B.F. No, no, no! We need something that will be more memorable. Think of all those future history students. We want something catchy... How about, "The Declaration of Independence"? So much easier to remember.

T.J. Nonsense, Ben. You are the one with all those sayings: "A penny saved is a penny earned." "Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." "You've got to spend words to make cents."

B.F. I never said that! You are thinking of, "You've got to spend money to make money."

T.J. Whatever!... Seriously, though, I am having difficulties with the beginning. I need something catchy, as you say...

B.F. Let me see what you have so far. (*bends over the table, again and reads aloud*) **"When in the course of human events..." Mmm, that is very good! "...Equal station to which the laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them,... a decent respect to the opinions of all..." Yes, yes, that looks good to me. What comes next?**

T.J. That part stumps me. Here, sit down, take my place. You write. I shall dictate. (Franklin sits. Jefferson stands.) *Hmmm... How about, "We hold these truths to be evident..." No, no. "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."*

B.F. (*writing frantically to keep up with the words*) **Oh, that is good, that is very good!** (*A knock sounds at the door*).

T.J. *Come in!* (Person at the door steps forward and bows, deeply) *Yes, what is it?*

S. Sorry to disturb you. Your bath is ready, Master Tom.

T.J. *At the moment I am busy. Keep the water hot for me until I finish. I shan't be more than a few hours.*

S. Yes, Master Tom. (*Samuel bows low and exits*).

B.F. Who was that?

T.J. *My slave, Samuel... Where were we?*

B.F. **“All men are created equal...”** *Players freeze for a moment, then quietly return to their pews).*

Ah, Thomas Jefferson that towering figure in the Jefferson Memorial... We remember Jefferson, not so much for the Louisiana purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition of his presidency, as for his leadership in the tumultuous time of the American Revolution, and especially his stirring prose in the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” Great words. Great talk.

But when it comes to slavery, Jefferson faces a dilemma in his personal life, and in the life of the thirteen colonies, which our little skit illustrates. The colonies' wealth, and much of Jefferson's wealth, is founded upon the unpaid labour and enslavement of men, women and children. Jefferson recognizes the evil of the institution of slavery, but, but...

Let us leave Jefferson, the author of our Declaration of Independence, for a moment, and turn to the author of several books in our Bible. Considering the New Testament, who is credited with writing most of the books in letter form in these Greek scriptures? [The Apostle Paul]

If Jefferson is a towering figure in the history of our nation, Paul is a giant in the story of Christianity. When I was studying for ministry, a Baptist student shared that she grew up thinking the Trinity was: God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Apostle Paul. For many Christians, Paul is huge. Yet Paul has also taken heat through the years because of the way some of his letters have been interpreted, wrongly interpreted, I would say.

Whether you like Paul or not, he has a lot to say. And for me, one of the endearing characteristics of Paul's writings is his honesty which underscores his humanity. Paul confesses his own shortcomings and sin, his dirty hands, to the churches in Rome when he writes, “For I do not do the good I want to do, but rather, I do the evil I do not want to do.” [*Romans 7:19*] How human and honest is that? While he talks the talk, Paul recognizes it is hard, often really hard, to walk the walk.

Any of you ever find yourself doing things that you have sworn off doing? Or not doing the things that you wanted to do, feeling overcome by the challenge? I know I have. So often we can talk the talk, we know what we “should” do, but we just can not seem to walk the walk, can not take those steps. From having a healthy diet—not too much salt, not too much sugar, not too much processed food (moderation in all things), to getting enough exercise, and getting enough rest, to recycling our compost. Then there are our relationships with others and our relationship with God. Lots of good intentions.

The so-called “seven deadly sins” form a pretty good umbrella for what afflicts me: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. These characteristics are millstones around our necks and shackles on our feet, enslaving us and dragging us down.

Paul reminds us Christ sets us free. Free to change. Free to be the people God made us to be.

God who is characterized NOT by sin, not by lust, gluttony, greed sloth, wrath envy and pride. But rather God who is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Created in God's image, these qualities are available to us, not as pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by-when-we-die. Rather these characteristics, these gifts, are available right now...right now..., through God's Holy Spirit.

How do we obtain these gifts? Or, having had them at one time or another, how do we keep them at the forefront of our lives? How do we do more than talk about them? I consider two concerns to be central: prayer and community. When we incorporate prayer and community into our daily lives, we can be free from the sinful characteristics, and the positive characteristics can actually govern our lives.

Prayer: prayer is nothing more than taking a moment and remembering God. Sure, you can close your eyes to shut out the hustle and bustle of the world, or fall on your knees, or fold your hands as a sign of reverence. And, sure, you can remember beautifully formulated prayers from the past using words like "thees, thous and giveths." But God lends an ear to whatever words we pray: poetic or plain, aloud or silent words in our hearts. Just turn your mind, even for a moment, to God. God listens to your prayer; and you will learn to listen to God.

Then there is community: community supports us in our prayers. Sometimes, especially if a daunting deed confronts us, we need community to encourage us to follow through on tasks. Are we wondering if we need to make an apology or amends? Community can help us discern what is right, and can help us walk the walk. Should we speak out on an issue or hold our tongue? Community can help us decide what words should be spoken, or what silence kept, on both a personal level and a corporate level. As our nation faces crises in health insurance, community can give direction to our nation's future well-being. As we face economic melt-down, community's common needs-considered can guide us back to prosperity.

As our world faces climate change, only through the world community co-operating will environmental catastrophe be averted.

Paul writes: the suffering of one part of the body is the suffering of the entire body. We can talk the talk. Will we walk the walk?

Those of you familiar with Twelve Step programmes know the incredible life-line community provides. Addictions of alcohol, drugs, gambling food, or any number of destructive behaviours cannot be resisted alone. But with a Higher Power, and with the encouragement of community through sponsors, the telephone, meetings, an addicted person finds encouragement and recovery. An addicted person finds the serenity to accept the things they cannot change, finds the courage to change the things they can change and finds the wisdom to know the difference.

Jefferson articulated, beautifully, the self-evident truths we know so well. All are created equal. *[pause]* Had Jefferson and the founders of this nation been willing to not just talk the talk of equality, but walk the walk of their words, the early years of this nation would have taken a very different turn.

God's spirit gifts us with love, joy, peace, patience kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us live by the spirit, and when we flag in our efforts, when doubt strikens our souls, when we feel unable to meet the challenge of God's Word, may we turn to prayer and community to renew our strength and walk in the ways of the Lord. Now and always. Amen.

Pray with me: God, thank you for the gifts of the Spirit. May we, when tempted to turn to sin, turn to you through them. Thank you for our community, people to whom we can turn when we are confused and unsure; people who will call us on our inconsistencies and contradictions. Help us be willing to see the dirt on our hands, the shadows in our heart, and confess them to you and others, opening ourselves to renewal and healing. Through Christ we pray. Amen.