

July 4, 2010
James 1:19-27
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Liberty and Truth

"Do you want to know who you are? Don't ask. Act! Action will delineate and define you." These words come from Thomas Jefferson.

In May, Ron and I were in Virginia visiting our daughter Lauren. We took the opportunity to visit Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson. He was a remarkable man. He was a horticulturist, architect, archaeologist, inventor, musician, and a memorable political leader. He served as Governor of Virginia and Secretary of State, Vice President and President of the U.S.. He was cofounder and leader of Democratic-Republican party of his time.

Yet, the things that were most important to him, which he had engraved on his tombstone were: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia."

On July 4th we remember Jefferson for his famous words in the Declaration of Independence, written when he was only 33 years old. *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.*

This vision of human rights has carried more power and vision than Jefferson could imagine at the time. For Jefferson those men who were equal were white, land-owning males. Slaves, women, and Native Americans were not included. Some of this obvious incongruity was not lost on everyone at the time. English abolitionist Thomas Day wrote in a 1776 letter, *"If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature it is an American patriot, signing resolutions of independency with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves."*

As each American generation strives to live out the vision of liberty to which we are called, it means telling the truth of the ways we still fall short. From the perspective of the 21st century it does seem obviously incongruous that the words "all men are created equal" come from a man who in his lifetime owned over 600 slaves. When you visit Monticello you realize that such a lifestyle was only possible through the work of slaves.

Jefferson's actions show him to be a complex man. He acted by writing a soaring vision of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness for all. Yet, he was also a slave owner, first inheriting slaves when he was only 14 years old. He was a man of vision, but also a man of his times. In other words, he was a hu-man.

Thankfully, something larger than himself, larger than even his own capacities for reason, something he called Creator, worked through him to create a declaration that itself was eventually a driving force in the argument for the abolition of slavery, for the right to vote for women, and for reparations with Native Americans. I wonder where this declaration might lead us in the future?

I wonder what future generations will consider obvious incongruities in our lives. They will wonder how we could have been so blind to the disconnections between our vision and our lifestyles.

Jefferson was aware of how such questions can paralyze people. We can spend so much time reflecting that we become simply hearers and analyzers rather than doers. Yet, it is in the doing that we learn about ourselves. As he said, "Action will delineate and define you." In the doing we may learn we were right, or we may learn we were wrong and need to change our ways.

In the reading today from James we are exhorted to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

We hear a similar exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount. After Jesus expounds on the core commandment to Love God and Love neighbor, we hear,

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!"

Loving God and loving neighbor is a challenge in every time and every place. Sometimes we are tempted to think we can only deal with loving neighbor in one-on-one situations, because it gets so complex when we get to systemic issues like slavery, and warfare, and poverty, and drug cultures, and immigration. Yet we are called to struggle with these larger systemic realities as well.

Today I want to consider Loving Neighbor and Immigration. That puts the challenges of liberty and truth telling right in front of us. We know even trying to tell the truth is complex, for there are so many strands of truth that are interwoven.

First, we are a land of immigrants. Even the ancestors of Native Americans were once immigrants to this continent. In fact if you go back far enough except for a small region in Africa every place on earth is inhabited by descendants of immigrants. Humans have been migrating around the world for thousands and thousands of years and usually, as Jefferson put it, in pursuit of Life (food), Liberty (opportunities) and Happiness.

Our Lady Liberty in the New York harbor proclaims, *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.*" That is why people come here. They are tired. They are poor. They are yearning to breathe free.

The truth is our earliest European ancestors on this continent came without asking permission. Most of our African ancestors were brought here against their will. Many immigrants, maybe most, over the years experienced hostility on their arrival. One of my great grandfathers came from Ireland in the day when there were signs saying, "No Irish need apply."

Being a land of immigrants has been one of our great challenges but one of our great strengths. Nowhere else in the world are so many different peoples learning to live together. At this time in history our greatest tensions around immigration are focused on our border with Mexico in the Southwestern parts of the country. If there is anyone who is our neighbor, along with Canada, it is Mexico. What does it mean for us to love our neighbor Mexico?

Estimates are that there are presently 11-20 million immigrants in this country who are not documented. Most of these people are from central and south America. When economic times are good, we pay less attention to this reality. When economic times are hard, it comes more to our attention, because in these times people are more tired, more poor, and more yearning; and that is true for citizens as well as undocumented immigrants. If people are hungry though, they will keep coming.

Living in the Southwest for many years I saw some of these struggles up close. The first time I saw the Wall in Nogales, I thought of the Berlin Wall in Germany. Walls may work for a while to slow down the traffic back and forth across a border, but I do not believe they can work indefinitely when you divide a people who are connected by blood and heritage. I once heard a woman whose ancestors have lived in the Southwest (on both sides of the border) for centuries say, "From my perspective, it is not that we cross the border, it is that the border crossed us."

People living in Arizona, U.S. and Sonora, Mexico are facing up close and personal the struggles around immigration that confront our countries. It is not surprising that the State of Arizona enacted a new law trying to get a handle on what is happening in Arizona. However, it is also disingenuous to say that there will be no racial profiling in the police directive to question "suspected" illegal aliens.

In recent decades in the Southwest there has been considerable efforts to improve relations between Hispanic and Anglo communities. Those relations are now increasingly strained.

One of the most dangerous things about the border at this time is the power of the drug cartels. The murder rate from drug wars has escalated significantly in Mexico in recent years. It is increasingly dangerous for U.S. citizens living on the border, especially if they challenge the drug dealers who cross their land. A decline in the economy increases the recruiting power of the drug dealers. The truth here that we don't often state out loud is that the drug cartels are powerful because we Americans buy their drugs. If we didn't buy the drugs they would have no business. It's a simple economic reality. Yet, it touches on the excruciatingly painful realities of addiction that confront so many people.

In the midst of our present dilemmas around immigration, I think we would be wise to consider again Thomas Jefferson's famous words *All(people) are created equal by their Creator with the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. Could it be that **all** people means even those who are not U.S. citizens? Now, I know someone will ask me in frustration, so you think we should just open the border? In fact, I don't think that. But I think the idea of national borders will become increasingly questioned as we move more and more into a global culture and economy.

As we continue to struggle with the issues of immigration as citizens and as people of faith we are wise to remember Jesus' words that we are *To love God and to love neighbor*.

And his words that come to us from the gospel of John:

If you continue in my word...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.
(John 8:31-32)