

Oxymoron Independent Christian
Scripture Lessons: Galatians 6:7-16, Luke 10:1-11

Prayer from St. Anselm, “O Light of the minds that know thee, life of the souls that love thee, strength of the wills that serve thee, help us so to know thee that we may truly love thee, and so to love thee that we may fully serve thee, *whom to serve is perfect freedom.*”

What is an oxymoron? It is two words put together that have contradictory meanings, like jumbo shrimp, Hell’s Angels, or Civil War. We all know that “Perfect Presbyterian” is a contradiction. Our prayer of confession sometimes betray that we think we are only “slightly depraved.” Any church leader who asks someone to help has sometime heard a “definite maybe.”

Anselm’s prayer might sound like an oxymoron to us. How can we ask God to be a “free slave”? How can we Americans who love our freedom on a day like July 4th also pray that we will find perfect freedom in faithful slavery to God?

“Independent Christian” is an oxymoron. There is no such thing. A Christian is NOT free. We respond to the first question of church membership by saying “Jesus Christ is Lord.” We say we follow; he is the one who leads. He commands, we obey. We are not free to pick and choose which commands we like. Lord means Ruler. We are bound to the rule of Christ. Lord means King. We are subjects – faithful or not. We are slaves of Christ, and obedience frees us from choices if we serve the master.

On an Independence Day, we Christians – followers of Christ – need to be careful about the way we celebrate our freedom as citizens.

“Freedom” – it’s a word with lots of definitions. I served as an Interim Instructor in the Trinity University Religion Department some years ago, teaching religious ethics. Ethics is all about choices, so I asked the class what “freedom” meant. Hands went up all over the room: “I can do anything I want.” “I can be anyone I want.” “No one can make me do what I don’t want.” Anyone who tries is “itching for a fight.” We wave the flag on Independence Day, and we also have that other flag with the colonial symbol, the rattlesnake found only in America, coiled and ready to strike. The message on that flag is one of our definitions of freedom: “Don’t tread on me.”

Instead celebrating freedom from the wrong tyranny like they did on the first Fourth, we can come to expect freedom from any rule we don’t like. Each of us has become a tyrant. What we mean by “freedom” is really that “I am my own ruler and I don’t submit to any rules I don’t like.” And if I have to submit, I really don’t like it. As one colonialist wrote, “the land is full of kings and queens.” Deep down in our delusions, even we Presbyterians talk all the time about God being in control, because all of us want to be “in control.”

...But we know we are not. That definition of freedom is a myth, a lie. None of us are independent. We depend on laws, we submit to powers, we are even subjects to rulers of all

sorts. We spend our time juggling the rulers and gods of different parts of our lives – whims of bosses or lies of politicians or limits of money – or the powers of those deep desires that drive us to good or not-so-good in our slight depravity. We are captive to all kinds of kings. Maybe Anselm's prayer should be ours. If we really gave up ourselves completely to Christ, we would be free from all those other rulers, ...even our deluded and depraved selves.

Jesus sent the followers out, two by two, and commanded them to say that “the kingdom of God had come near.”

Jesus lived in a world of Ceasars and citizens, of lords and subjects, of Masters and slaves. No one in Jesus' time had any idea of independence – not even Jesus. They could not imagine our “freedom,” and we cannot imagine their life of “kingdoms” and “rulers” like the early Christians did, much less like the colonials did. We have no idea what Jesus means by “kingdom of God.” Truth be told, we do not believe in “kingdoms” at all! We don't like king talk in church. It sounds so, ...so alien to our experience. We think the Kingdom of God is heaven far away where we get some reward because we have been good people. To Jesus and his followers, the Kingdom of God was any place and any people where Christ ruled over subjects, where he was Lord and Master of their lives. The Kingdom of God is here and NOW, wherever and with whomever Jesus Christ is Lord. So if Christ is ruler, our question this morning is clear: Does he rule us?

In his instructions and commands to followers we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us followers a command: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Knowing a little better now what he meant, let's translate the text to clarify the rule of the ruler: “Step toward the rule of your Lord in all of your living, follow only his command and his example, and everything else will find its proper place.” If you follow, you are not free. Followers do not get to go where they want, stepping out of his steps is not following. We cannot wander off when we are following. We cannot sit and stop moving and still follow. He is Lord and Master, we are subjects and slaves. We find our freedom in being obedient and faithful.

Galatia was not a gathering of free people. They were an interdependent community. Paul said they were to “work for the good of all, especially the gathered house of faith ...by finding peace in following Christ's rule.” No one was free to be independent. They were all interdependent because they all depended on Christ's rule. They were all followers learning to go in one direction – Christ's direction.

A church is not a gathering of “free spirits.” We are a gathering of individuals bound by a common commitment to the rule of Christ in each of our lives and all our living together. We follow together, we follow in one direction – Christ's direction. Our interdependence is in our dependence. We are not just community; we are a communion of one loaf and cup. This is not just a table; it is the Lord's Table. We are free in Christ because we are subject to Christ and no other. We are freed from the power of other rules – even sinful ones – freed to follow in his direction, free because we serve him completely.

July 4, 1776, a group gathered to sign a document declaring their independence from the wrong ruler. It was not a statement that any one of us can do whatever we want, or that any one of us knows what is best for everybody else. It was a dream for an experiment that together in interdependence and with some patience and trust in the common wisdom, we would be better off in the long run.

Contrary to some current “political wisdom” (there’s another oxymoron), we owe a great debt to Thomas Jefferson. He and Madison understood the tyranny of Puritans who forgot they were impure, of Separatists who forgot to stay separate. Jefferson saw the tendency in faith to impose its ideas like tyranny. He trusted that living faith in interdependence and humility would lead all reasonable people to better things in the long run. So Jefferson and Madison’s advocacy became the first amendment to set religious faith free in the exercise but not free to establish a tyranny.

Jefferson was not Presbyterian or Puritan or perfect. He loved what he thought was “Liberty” so much that he put the word on his tombstone. But he was a man of the enlightenment with a great optimism in the power of reason. He forgot what Augustine said: “The heart has its reasons which reason cannot know.” We shape our reasons by our wills and desires. Jefferson forgot how we are always subjects of some Lord when we have the myth that we are our own kings and queens.

There is no such thing as an “independent Christian.” We Christians know we are only free from other rulers when we are free in obedience to Christ. There is nothing about independence at this Table. “This is the joyful feast” of complete dependence on the Lord for life by his definition and through living his life. People gather from all directions to confess their interdependence as the body of Christ through their dependence on his body and blood. We cannot eat this loaf and cup and live an oxymoron life.

Who in their right mind would want independence from the life that is his gift from his table?

Why would we ever want to be free, when being the obedient servants of our only Lord saves us in a perfect freedom?