

Taking A Walk Down Memory Lane
“Independence” versus Living “in Dependence” on God
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When Marilyn and I first began dating, my idea of a date was to invite her on my Sunday morning supply preaching assignments. I could stop there, and ponder how prescient that model turned out to be, especially for Marilyn, but that would take us far afield and further into our marriage than any of you really want to go. Anyway, thirty-three years ago, when Marilyn and I were dating, if you can call it that, we travelled to a small Ohio congregation – somewhere I couldn’t do much harm – just ahead of the Fourth of July weekend. I was a second-year seminarian, who was trying to develop a “can’t miss” preaching theme, and I settled on the difference between our focus on *Independence* in America and the promise of living *in dependence* on God. It seemed simple enough: *independence* versus *in dependence*; but what a loser it turned out to be!

The Old Testament Lesson that Sunday was the creation and fall text in the book of Genesis. Adam was created in the image of God (*imago Dei* in Latin), but the Serpent told him that the best way to master that image and fulfill its promise was to be like God (*sicut deus* in Latin). The Serpent’s advice was to steer clear of just trying to fit into the place and plan God had designed for us. That was not enough. We should go for the gusto, reach for the heavens. We shouldn’t settle for God’s mere image; rather, we should become like God in power, in prestige, and in prominence: ascend to the top; mingle with the mighty; take charge; make our own rules. We’re the ones in control. Let’s not settle for anything less. Let’s not settle for being a mere image of God. Let’s become like God! That was the fall. Adam chose *sicut deus* over *imago Dei*. He chose aspiring to become like God, rather than embracing what it means to be human, living in relationship with a loving God. He chose independence, being on his own, rather than living in dependence on a God who wants with all His heart to give us a world that knows His love, that lives His love, and is guided by that love.

I know that you are probably saying, “How can that be a loser?” Just let me keep talking. Sometimes the short and simple is better left short and simple. Sometimes, you’ve got a good slogan that can fill a 30-second commercial, but not a 30-minute program, nor a 20-minute sermon. I’ll admit that *independence* versus *in dependence* is catchy, kind of thought-provoking, a memorable slogan, but a very forgettable sermon. As a catchy sermon theme, it builds on the age-old theme of taking a good thing too far. If a little power is good, then more power must be better. If a little control is good, then complete control must be better. If a little is good, then a whole lot must be better. But in the process we lose a sense of how limits are the key to keeping things in perspective, to maximizing the potential, effect, and result of our aims, actions, or desires.

Limits in general are good to know. Practically speaking, whether we are talking about ourselves or our country, defying limits and denying limits can lead to disastrous results. Iraq has become a classic case of not knowing one’s limits. It was truly phenomenal, astounding,

an exhibition of awesome might that the American military could overthrow the established and entrenched regime of Saddam Hussein in such short order. That was something we could do. But building a civil society governed by law and leading to order: that was something we couldn't do. That's something Iraqis must do. It's a matter of knowing our limits. Politically speaking, the Bush Administration rode that first challenge to victory in 2004, riding a wave of patriotism to victory at the polls. But Republicans paid a heavy price in 2008, when critics had lots to complain about with an unstable Iraq on display in the headlines on a daily basis. Not knowing our limits and not respecting our limits can have disastrous results, as a nation and as individuals.

You see how easy it is to take what seemed like a good idea for a sermon and turn it into an "eyes-glazing-over" special? Well, getting back to that date: the year was 1976. Viet Nam was fresh on our minds; articles of impeachment, even fresher. Can you imagine a liberal university-educated Northeasterner speaking to Lutherans in rural Ohio about America on the Fourth of July? I think that Marilyn, a lifelong Lutheran raised on fields of corn and beans in rural Iowa, was just plain surprised by what I would say from the pulpit, and, every now and then, still is! Let's face it, the Fourth of July is a time for celebrating Independence – our independence from King George III in 1776, our independence as a free people in this land we love, our independence from the entanglements of Old Europe, our independence from the tyrannies of fascism, communism, and despotism. But we can't close our eyes to the lessons of the fall in Genesis: grasping at the opportunity to be like God, rather than learning to live within the limits that come with our being created in the image of the one true God.

The First Lesson and the Gospel raise what philosophers call "limiting" questions. Older translations of Ezekiel use the reference *Son of man* in place of *O Mortal*. The nice thing about the older translation is the connection it makes to the title Jesus used as a self-reference in the Gospels. The nice thing about the new translation is that it captures Ezekiel's intent, which is to express and instill humility as we ponder the human condition. We are creatures of flesh and blood, who are limited by episodes of diminishing strength, occasional lapses in memory, declining mental prowess, and ultimately death. God, on the other hand, is glorious, infinite in majesty, the creator of all that is, of everything we see, and all that we can't see, or know, or even imagine. God has promised to breathe new life into our mortal bodies. In the famous prophetic vision that Ezekiel describes in chapter 37, God directs the *Son of man* to look upon a valley filled with nothing but dry bones, and then miraculously breathes new life into these dry bones, recreating those bones into a living body, which represents the entire community of God's people, never to know bondage to slavery, tyranny, or death again.

Mortality is one way to address questions of limitations. Judgment is another. The term *Son of man* would change with the prophetic work of Daniel and Enoch. These prophets helped shape the way in which Jesus identified with the term *Son of man*, not as a reference to his humanity and mortality, but as the figure whose coming would announce the end of the age; and the age that his coming ushers in is the new age announced with the birth of the church as the new community of God's people, whose life embodies God's presence as it proclaims God's salvation. That's what the Gospel Lesson is telling us with both of its parts. In the first part of today's Gospel, Mark talks about Jesus' having a family – his mother Mary, brothers

James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, along with sisters, too. Mark, as you'll remember, did not have a nativity narrative. This is the second introduction we have to Jesus' natural family; and it is joined to the community of disciples who will become his spiritual family. In chapter 3, where we hear of Jesus' family for the first time, it is Jesus who makes the distinction, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:33-35) Here in chapter 6, Jesus commissions the twelve disciples, the core of his new family, to proclaim the Good News of his kingdom, and they take the world by storm, as Jesus' power makes their mission successful. It is just a taste of more to come after the resurrection, when Jesus' being raised from the dead by the glory of the Father signals the end of this age and the beginning of the next, which is the arrival of the kingdom of God.

What is important here is that this unnoticed community is nowhere on the radar of great powers like Rome, and that's clearly part of the point. God has not chosen the kingly, the powerful, the rich and famous to proclaim the Good News of His reign. From the beginning of Jesus' story, it is the vulnerable, the marginalized, the poor, the forgotten and rejected – recall Jesus' instructions that the Twelve take nothing for their journey, no bread, no bag, no money, just the shoes on their feet and the coat on their back – these are the folks who became the building blocks of the greatest story ever told. They didn't have their own resources; so they depended upon God's. They didn't have their own power; so they depended upon God's. They didn't have any credentials of their own; so they were completely dependent upon God. *Independence* versus *in dependence*: there it is again.

You know, I've preached some doozies over the years – not so many here, since I got a bunch of them out of my system before I arrived at Zion. But, I've got to admit that this may be the last time anyone hears this one. When I'm gone and heading for those pearly gates, I'm sure that St. Peter's first words, the conditional premise for my going any farther, will be, "Give it up! When Jesus said 'Let the dead bury the dead', he wasn't just talking about people. Don't torture yourself, and certainly do not torture us with this theme any more!" *Independence* versus *in dependence*: a good slogan, to be sure; a catchy commercial for Christian living, maybe; a great sermon on the Fourth of July, give it up. And so, I just might do that. But while we're still on the topic of today, it's important to remember that when God was choosing to save the world with the fulfillment of His promise to humankind, He didn't choose the powerful nations on earth to set the stage, build the foundation, or advance the cause of His new creation. He sent Jesus, who formed the church, which became the spiritual embodiment and living instrument of God's vision for the world and God's plan for creation.

That's the message we want to take away with us on this Fourth of July weekend. This is the primary point I've been trying to proclaim. Independence isn't the key; living in dependence on God, that's the key. America is great, but America isn't the key to God's plan for the world. That responsibility goes to the church, the greatest story ever told, formed from a handful of unreliable, disorganized, poorly-equipped and even more poorly disciplined disciples to become a community that fills the pages of history and covers the nations of the world with the Good News that God lives, and has acted decisively to save us by His grace, which is ours... in Jesus' name. Amen