

SCRIPTURE TEXT: 1 Peter 2:13-17

SERMON TITLE: A Free People

I don't understand it, but the 4th of July has some strange sort of hold on me. The patriotic music, the fireworks, the red, white and blue of the flags all combine to stir some deep emotions within me that are, I guess, a mixture of pride and gratitude and even some sadness as I recall the sacrifices so many have made to make us and to keep us a free people.

And I really don't understand where the depth of these emotions comes from. I'm proud and grateful for other things, but not always in a spine-tingling, chill-bump-producing sort of way that happens on the 4th of July. I can remember as a little kid watching baseball games on TV and every time they played the National Anthem to start a ball game, I would come to attention there in the living room in front of the TV set and salute the flag--and yet I have no idea where I learned to do this.

I do have a better understanding of where the sadness comes from. When I was on the staff of the Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, I heard so many heart wrenching stories of the horrors of combat. I saw men in their later years of life weep like babies at the memory of events that had taken place decades before--events seared on their souls and in their memories. And every time Taps is played at a memorial ceremony, I shed a tear right along with them even though I've never served in the military and could never fully imagine what they went through for the sake of our nation.

On the 4th of July it's pretty easy to follow the counsel offered in 1 Peter and to accept the authority of our government and to honor the rulers of our nation. At their best, human institutions and those who serve in them are used by God to restrain those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 1 Peter encourages us to live honorable lives and to be good citizens.

But for those of us in the church, good citizenship does not mean forgetting who we are.

On the 4th of July in America, for example, it's important for those of us who follow Jesus to remember that we celebrate freedom of a different kind--the kind of freedom that governments and even a noble document like our own Declaration of Independence simply can't give. We celebrate the kind of freedom that only comes through serving God. 1 Peter puts it this way: *As servants of God, live as free people.* The issue here is spiritual freedom not political freedom. Now spiritual freedom has political implications, but it's not the same thing as political freedom. We can be politically free and yet live in deep spiritual bondage to things other than God. In the same way, we can live in the most oppressive society on earth and still be spiritually free.

And wasn't Jesus the perfect example of this? Jesus lived in a colonized nation under the heavy hand of Rome. There was no political freedom for him as we know it in America today. And yet, spiritually speaking, wasn't Jesus the freest human being that ever walked the face of the earth? And where did that freedom come from? He served God completely. He gave his ultimate allegiance not to the Empire, not to Caesar, not to the religious authorities, not to some popular political ideology; but he gave his allegiance to God. He served God completely--and he was free.

My brothers and sisters, we're called to be a free people who serve God. It's in obedience to God that we strive to be good and honorable citizens, but we dare not use our freedom as a pretext for evil. Our task as the church is to discern the will of God, to declare it with the prophet's boldness, and then to do it. So when human institutions and governments and national leaders violate the will of God by perpetuating injustice and sowing the seeds of violence, then the church has a responsibility to call these institutions to account for the Lord's sake.

Now I know that our text tells us to *accept the authority of every human* institution--and

our text tells us to *Honor the emperor*. But we need to remember that this is not the last biblical word on this subject. By the time we get to the book of Revelation, Rome is described as the Great Whore and the church is called to resist the authority of the emperor. So this is not a matter of my country, right or wrong. On the contrary, when human institutions violate the very principles they're instituted to protect, then both good citizenship and faithfulness to God, requires the church to speak out.

When the Roman Emperor Domitian demanded that his subjects worship him as Lord, the church resisted and many Christians, as free people, were martyred for the faith. When Christianity itself was declared illegal in the Roman Empire and the persecution of Christians became the official policy of the state, the church resisted and many Christians, as free people, took to worshipping in the catacombs.

On the other hand, when many in the church failed as servants of God to live as free people as the Nazis came to power in Germany, swastikas were brought into sanctuaries, pastors declared Hitler their *Fuehrer*, military conquest was blessed by the church, and genocide of the most brutal and systematic kind was condoned or at least conveniently ignored.

On the other hand, in our own country, when many in the church failed as servants of God to live as free people, Africans by the thousands were enslaved and once liberated, subjected to the bigotry of neighbors, to racial segregation and oppressive Jim Crow laws.

My brothers and sisters, I love America and the political freedoms we enjoy. Those feelings I experience on the 4th of July are real and deep. I strive to be a good citizen. But our nation needs for the church to serve God as a free people. When our institutions and leaders fail to do right by the will of God, it's our responsibility to say so and to follow Christ no matter what the cost. To do any less, is to fall back into bondage--and I don't want to be a slave

anymore. I want to be free as a servant of God. How about you? Amen.