

"MY COUNTRY 'TIS OF THEE"
July 1, 1990

TEXT: John 8:31-32 "Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'"

97 years ago one of our Congregational ancestors experienced an important turning-point in her life. Katherine Lee Bates was a shy small town New England girl who became a professor at Wellesley College. Like many New Englanders she had little knowledge of --or interest in-- any part of this great country which lay outside of New England, west of the sacred Hudson as they say.

Though she had traveled in New England and in Europe, it was not until she was 34 years old that a summer teaching job took her to Colorado. There one morning she observed the sunrise from the summit of Pike's Peak, and she was so overcome that she wrote these words:

"O beautiful for spacious skies, for
amber waves of grain, for purple mountain
majesties above the fruited plain! America!
America! God shed his grace on thee, and
crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to
shining sea."

That song has always been very special to me --ever since I first heard Kate Smith sing it. Yet it never really struck home in all its glory until the last week of June in 1974, when I flew from Wichita, Kansas, to Seattle, Washington, on the way to the annual meeting of our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

In just a few hours we flew over the golden wheatfields of Kansas, full, and ripe, and ready for harvest; the snow-topped mountains of Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho; the incredible grandeur of Mt. Rainier, towering thousands of feet above its surroundings, rather like a giant ice cream sundae; and, finally, the shimmering beauty of Puget Sound, dotted with islands and framed by the Olympic Mountains in the background. It was then that I really understood how wonderfully God has blessed this land of ours.

But many parts of the world are rich in beauty and in resources. What makes this country really special is not its geography, but the freedoms we enjoy. "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing." Go to those who have risked everything to make their way to this great land, and ask them why they came. They will not tell you that they came for security, though security may well be important to them. They will not say that they came to become rich, though they may work very hard to do so. Again and again they will answer with just one word: "freedom."

General Omar Bradley once wrote, "No word was ever spoken that has held out greater hope, demanded greater sacrifice, needed more to be nurtured, or came closer to being God's will on earth." Of all our many blessings --and they are many indeed-- none is as precious as our freedom.

So it is fitting that, on this fourth of July week-end, we should pause to remember what we too-easily forget; that our precious freedom is far from free. It has been purchased at great cost by the sacrifices of brave men and women in every generation. And it will last only as long as you and I are determined to preserve it, as long as we, like those patriots of 1776, nurture and protect it with "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

It is fitting, too, that we celebrate our liberty here in church. Our own Bill Grede, while he was president of the National Association of Manufacturers, wrote, "Freedom as we understand it in America, is not an economic discovery. It is not . . . a political discovery. It is a religious discovery." The brave men who voted for independence two hundred-fourteen years ago were more than just patriots. They were also men of deep and abiding faith. When they took their lives in their hands and signed the Declaration of Independence, they did so in the firm belief that freedom is a divine gift.

They said, "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." For them freedom was to be sought, not just because it was pleasant and desirable, nor even because it meant relief from annoying limitations and restrictions. For them liberty was a spiritual imperative.

And freedom is more than just political. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." That is, if we live according to Christ's teachings we can discover for ourselves how true they are. And that discovery liberates us from ignorance and fear. "'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit,' says the Lord of hosts." (Zechariah 4:6) Or, as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, ". . . Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (II Corinthians 3:17)

But there always seem to be those who want to take shortcuts, who want freedom without God. So some of those who heard Christ's words resented them. They said, "We are the descendants of Abraham. And we have never in our lives been anyone's slaves. How can you say to us, 'You will be set free?'" They seem to have thought it enough that their ancestors had faith, that the devotion of their fathers would save them, too.

Even today some people seem to feel that way. I remember a former parishoner who once said to me, "I know I don't go to church very much, but what the heck, we're all Americans." If I understand his strange logic correctly, that was his twentieth century equivalent of "We are all descendants of Abraham." Yet he used to call me at 12:30 or 1:00 o'clock in the morning after he had had too much to drink and tell me how unhappy he was.

Was he really free? Of course not! As an American, he had the same civil rights, the same social rights, the same economic rights we all have. But he was far from free. He was the prisoner of his own weaknesses. A long time ago William Penn said, "Men must be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants." And what does it matter whether that tyrant is one's self or another?

We Americans have been blessed with a large measure of freedom from the tyranny of others. But are we really free? Are we truly happy? Many, it would seem, are not. That is why we spend such huge sums of money on entertainment, medications, and therapy. Anything to forget how unfree we really are. As Erich Fromm wrote, "Man has achieved freedom from --without yet having achieved freedom to-- to be himself, to be productive, to be fully awake."

Like the rest of you, I thank God for my freedom from. I cherish it for myself, for my family, and for others. But I know that true liberty is not the result of freedom from. John Foster Dulles wrote, "Our nation was founded as an experiment in human liberty. Its institutions reflect the belief of our founders that men had their origin and destiny in God; that they were endowed by Him with inalienable rights, and duties prescribed by moral law, and that human institutions are primarily to help men develop their God-given possibilities."

That is what freedom means to me. To enjoy our God-given rights, to fulfill our God-given duties, to develop our God-given possibilities. It is not license as so many seem to think it is. Freedom from the soil is no freedom for a tree. And our natural soil, in which alone we grow and flourish, is the Spirit of God. True liberty, then, is not the result of what we are free from, but of from what we bind ourselves to. "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

Many years ago, James Russell Lowell wrote: "What we want is . . . a country whose greatness is measured not only by its

square miles, its number of yards woven, or hogs packed, or bushels of wheat raised, not only by its skill to feed and clothe the body, but by its power to feed and clothe the soul; a country which shall be as great morally as it is materially; a country whose very name shall call out all that is best within us."

"Our Fathers' God to Thee, Author of liberty, to Thee we sing; Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light; Protect us by Thy might, Great God, our King."