

"Celebrating Who We Are (and Whose We Are)!"

***Exodus 19:1-6
July 3, 2011***

***John 17:20-23
St. James UCC***

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The Israelite people had a strong sense of their identity. They were a people who had been called by God, a people who had a special covenant with God, a people who were specially blessed by God. One of the foundational moments in their relationship with God is described in our passage from Exodus. Here God reminds the Israelite people how it was God who rescued them from their slavery in Egypt, bearing them forth to a new way of life. Then God says to them, "Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own people. The whole earth is mine, but you will be my chosen people, a people dedicated to me alone, and you will serve me as priests."

This passage defined their relationship with God. The responsibility of the Israelite people was to obey God, to dedicate their lives to serving God, and in return God claimed them as God's own people, a nation of priests.

From that time forth the Israelite people looked back on that moment, passing the message on from one generation to the next. For their relationship with God, as described in this passage, defined who they were and how they should live. It gave them a national identity that was different from all others, and bound them to each other and to God in a special way.

I mention that passage because we gather here to worship on this fourth of July weekend - a special time in the life of our own country, a time when we celebrate our heritage, when we remember and celebrate who we are. Sometimes though I think that we forget, or at least get a little fuzzy about who we are and what it is that we're celebrating.

That fuzziness comes in because sometimes we simplify our patriotism to an attitude that says "America is the greatest nation in the world". When we do that, we're turning it into an I'm better than you argument, instead of celebrating the qualities that have shaped our lives and have made our nation great. The danger is that if we lose sight of those qualities like freedom, opportunity for all, and yes, our faith in God, if we lose sight of those very qualities which have made us great, then we also lose touch with our foundations, and very quickly we start losing touch with our identity, we lose track of who we really are.

This holiday is not just a big party with lots of fireworks, although I fear that for many people that is all that there is to the Fourth of July. At its heart, this day is a celebration of those qualities and that dedication that created this nation. We are celebrating the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the commitment of those who were willing to dedicate their lives to the creation of this nation. We are celebrating their commitment to freedom, to opportunity, to a nation which is under God.

Sometimes we forget pieces of who we are, important pieces, and in the process we lose track of what it is that we are really celebrating. The Hebrew people encountered the same problem. They would enjoy some successes, and people would start to forget about

God, deciding that the victories which they had won were theirs and theirs alone, and that they didn't need to rely upon God any more. Whenever that happened, and it happened a number of times, disaster was just around the corner, because they had lost touch with who they really were.

Time after time, prophets would arise to call the people back to their roots, to remind them that they were God's people, and that that relationship was indeed a central part of their identity. Once again people who be reminded of and remember this passage from Exodus, and as they would start to identify themselves as God's people, they would be renewed.

I mention their experience because it has some important messages for us. As our text from John reminds us, we too are a people who belong to God. Our unity, our glory, indeed all of the talents and the abilities that we have are gifts from God. As we live and grow we need to recognize that we are a people who belong to God. We are God's people. Just as that was a part of the Israelite's heritage, that is a part of our heritage as well.

As we look around at our society we see that that is a part that is often forgotten. Today, many people have no church affiliation. Many others have a church affiliation, but it means very little. It is like a club that they have joined, and once in a while they participate in it, but it doesn't really effect their lives in any significant way.

The founders of our nation knew the importance of their faith and their religious heritage. They themselves were deeply religious people, and it's no accident that patriotic statements like our pledge of allegiance include the words "one nation under God" or that our money includes the motto "in God we trust".

Their faith was the foundation upon which they built their lives. They knew that their faith was a key ingredient in the founding of our nation, for they saw this nation as a nation, a people who belonged to God. They clearly wanted freedom of religion, so people were free to choose, rather than to be coerced into a particular path, but just as clearly, their faith was very important to who they were and how they lived.

Today as we look at our society, we've lost much of that passion for our faith. Too often people are only concerned about themselves, about what they're going to get out of life, about how they can get what they want. When you boil it down, what's happened is that people have lost touch with their faith in God.

Years ago as then President John F. Kennedy was at Amherst College for a ceremony in honor of the poet Robert Frost, he said, "I look forward to a great future for America, a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose... I look forward to an America which commands respect for its civilization...".

Many years after those words were spoken, we know that we still have not come close to achieving that dream. We have a long ways to go, and if we are to get there, we must somehow be renewed by being reminded of the commitment, the dedication, the faith with which our nation was begun.

As we go forth today to to enjoy this special weekend, let us do so in joy and honor, for we are a part of a great nation, and I think each of us knows in our heart of hearts that

there is no where else that we would rather live. Yet at the same time, let us go forth we a sense of renewed dedication to claiming the very roots of who we are. For at it's very heart, the fourth of July is a celebration of who we are, and we cannot truly celebrate that without celebrating that we are a people who belong to God. God has claimed us, and if we are to fulfill our potential, then we too must claim our relationship with God.

Amen.