

John Adams, in a letter to his wife Abigail wrote these words in 1776.

I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival.

It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward for evermore.

He wrote these words on July 3, 1776 referring to the day before, when the resolution for independence was passed. Adams' words were prophetic, even though he was off by a couple of days.

As the news spread, celebrations began immediately. In that first year, they featured readings of the Declaration of Independence in public places, accompanied by the firing of muskets and cannon.

The statue of King George in New York was torn down and its lead turned into bullets. Everywhere were military parades, bells ringing, toasts, fireworks, music and "loud huzzas."

In 1781, the legislature of Massachusetts became the first to officially designate the Fourth of July as a holiday commemorating the birth of independence; in 1783 — the year the Revolutionary War formally ended — the governor of North Carolina followed suit.

All of this began 233 years ago with the words from the Declaration of Independence,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands, which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind

requires that they should declare the causes  
which impel them to the separation.  
We hold these truths to be self-evident,  
that all men are created equal,  
that they are endowed, by their Creator,  
with certain unalienable Rights,  
that among these are Life, Liberty,  
and the pursuit of Happiness.

With those words resounding throughout  
the centuries we find ourselves in our church  
celebrating the Fourth of July free from persecution,  
free from those that would take away our right to worship.  
These men sought to throw off the  
yoke of tyranny from a distant ruler.

When you hear the word independence  
what words associated with it come to your mind?  
Freedom, peace, prosperity, liberty?  
The Constitution of our land proclaims ...  
We the People ...

Of those fifty We who signed the Declaration:  
5 were captured by the British and tortured before they died.  
12 had their homes ransacked and burned.  
2 lost their sons in the war.  
9 either died from war wounds or from hardships suffered in the war.  
Freedom is costly and that by no means is a new concept.

Freedom is considered the pinnacle of the human condition,  
but in it are responsibilities and costs to consider.  
Many of you know some about those costs  
as you went to war to defend our freedom  
and watched as many of your friends  
didn't return home alongside of you.  
But what freedom does freedom truly bring?

Several years ago as I was watching the fireworks  
from Riverfront park and channel 4 was interviewing people  
about what freedom means to them.

One young man said, and I will never forget it,  
Freedom means that I can do anything that I want.  
Really? Is that all freedom means?  
I am afraid that many people live in that depth  
of understanding about freedom.

But there is a greater freedom than simply is provided by our country. It is the freedom found in Christ. And in our passage of scripture from Galatians, Paul talks about the freedom we have all been given and how we are to use that freedom properly.

He says in verse 13 that you have been called to be free. Free in Christ. We are free from the guilt of sin because we have experienced God's forgiveness. We are free because Christ died for us on a cross. We are called into liberty.

In John 8:31-32 Jesus said  
If you continue in my word then you are truly disciples of mine; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.

But notice there is a responsibility that comes from freedom. Our freedom is something that we can use for God and the Kingdom or it is something we can abuse and use for our own selfish benefit.

Then Paul goes on to say how we are to use that freedom. Does it say that we should go out and do whatever we want to do because we will be forgiven? No. Paul says in verse 13 serve one another in love. The same Greek word is translated "be enslaved by" in another part of the book so Gal 5:13 could say Be slaves to one another. The kind of life required of a slave is a life lived entirely for others.

George Bernard Shaw said:  
"This is the true joy in life – being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. Being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

There's nothing worse in this life than  
to be doomed to focus only on yourself.  
The more you do that, the more miserable you will be.  
I believe that Shaw had it right.  
Serving is the door to real life.  
Service flows out of love.

It is the door to joy and contentment and peace.  
It is the door to an abundant life  
that leads to the fruits of the spirit.  
Jesus says in John 10 I have come that you  
may have life and that you may have it more abundantly.

A life of freedom sounds like  
an abundant life to me.  
When we are free in Christ we get to  
experience more life, more vitality,  
more of all that life has to offer.  
But this is not the kind of freedom that leads  
to the abuse of freedom,  
the kind that leads to self indulgence,  
which in turn destroys the freedom that gave birth to it.  
That is bondage my friends.  
Slavery.

Serving others, Paul says,  
always leads to more freedom.  
So if you want your freedom to  
increase this morning,  
get going with serving!

We all have places of bondage and slavery in our lives  
that we need to be freed from.  
Depression isn't freedom, its constriction.  
Anxiety isn't freedom, its constriction.  
Guilt isn't freedom, its constriction.  
Anger isn't freedom, its constriction.  
Bitterness and criticalness aren't freedom,  
they are constriction.  
They all have negative consequences, don't they?

My friends, if you want to be more in this life  
than a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments  
and grievances complaining that the world will not  
devote itself to making you happy,

then you must serve!  
Serving is the freedom-grower.

Serving is what gets you off of the Me-Mill,  
that just goes endlessly around and around and around  
but never takes you any place.

It leaves you spent and wasted and guilty  
and isolated and frustrated, but other than that,  
exactly where you were when you started –  
just as empty, just as lonely, just as depressed.

Serving is the freedom-grower.  
Serving is the path off of the Me-Mill.

Jesus brings a freedom that  
never doubles back and devours itself.  
And as his children we need to live that  
kind of freedom out as well.

In verse 15 Paul says probably some of the most  
important words there are for a church.

If you keep in biting and devouring each other,  
watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

The freedom God gives us is not to be used  
to harm one another but to help each other.  
Paul is saying yes you have freedom to be mean  
to each other but eventually that will destroy you  
so what kind of freedom is that?

Instead use your freedom to serve one  
another-that's how freedom grows.  
True freedom brings more freedom.  
We in the church community are gathered  
as one body though we are different parts.  
There is no place for members of the body  
to attack and hurt one another.

Not in our meetings. Not in our gatherings.  
Not in our hallways. Not in our parking lot or pews.  
Every church has disagreements and differences  
in thinking but we are all working together for the same goal.  
I believe Christ shakes his head in disbelief  
every time we can't get along in the church.

Being new I hope that we are freed from that here  
or will be freed from that kind of slavery in the future.

All it does is interfere with the work of Christ  
and it breaks the spirit of the body and shows  
the world outside of our doors we are no different.  
Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader once said  
"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.  
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Shaw had something else to say.  
I am of the opinion that my life belongs  
to the whole community and as long as I live  
it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.  
I want to be thoroughly used up when I die.  
For the harder I work, the more I live.  
I rejoice in life for its own sake.  
Life is no brief candle to me.  
It's a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up  
for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly  
as possible before handing it on to future generations."

God has given us a great gift called freedom.  
We are free from guilt and the penalty of sin.  
We have to decide what we will do with that freedom,  
will we use it or abuse it.  
Will we use it to love, serve and build up others  
or will we use it to destroy and devour.  
What freedom does freedom bring?  
The power to decide to love.

The way each one of us uses our freedom in Christ  
will determine what kind of community,  
what kind of country we will have.  
Our true freedom comes from Christ alone.  
It is the freedom to love and to serve.  
May we use that freedom to its fullest today and every day. Amen.