

IN(TER)DEPENDENCE DAY

Well over two centuries ago, in Philadelphia, representatives from thirteen British colonies signed a statement, a declaration, that proclaimed their belief that “all men are created equal,” and that each one has certain “unalienable rights” including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” And since in their minds, these rights were being limited and restricted by King George and the English parliament, they pronounced the colonies they represented independent from English rule. “All political connection” between the colonies and Great Britain, they declared, “ought to be fully dissolved.”

With the signing of that declaration on July 4th, 1776, and the ringing of what would be later known as the Liberty Bell, a nation was born. Our nation. One dedicated to freedom from foreign tyranny and, in time, one increasingly devoted to personal freedom. We often call the holiday the 4th of July—but we would be wise to remember its real name, Independence Day.

Make no mistake; I cherish our independence as a nation. I am glad that we are able to set our own course as we move through history. And I am extremely grateful for the personal freedoms our nation affords each one of us. I am more than grateful that I can stand here in this venerable old pulpit and honestly speak my mind, express my heart and proclaim God’s Word as I understand it. I am well-aware of the great privilege we share in our ability to assemble and worship without fear of state intrusion or official interference. It is good to be here and have no concern, as so many religious folks in other countries do, that some soldier or police officer will ram through the rear door and place each one of us under arrest simply because of our beliefs.

And beyond that, I know that our independence as a nation, and our freedoms as individuals, have come at a high cost. I know there are some here today who have literally put their lives on the line in defense of that independence and those freedoms. And I am painfully aware that even as I speak young men and women are in harm’s way in Iraq and Afghanistan because of their strong commitment to our nation and its ideals. And I know personally persons left behind, parents, a sister, a girlfriend, who mourn deeply the loss of a son who died defending those beliefs in Iraq. Their sacrifice, and the sacrifice of so many in similar situations, is incalculable. And we do well to honor our troops and support their families.

Make no mistake. I am proud to be an American. I believe it is important that we wave the flag, and sing patriotic songs. It is important that we hear the speeches and remember our history. It is important that we celebrate Independence Day and consider all that it represents.

But I would humbly suggest that there is, at least for Christians, and I suspect for all people, a higher goal for which we can strive, something in this shrinking world of ours which is even more important than independence, and that, my friends, is interdependence.

Stop with me for a minute and consider three words: dependence, independence, and interdependence.

Dependence means I need you in order to do something. A baby, for instance, is totally dependent on its parents for survival. Children, and some adults, are even called dependents. If you have two kids, you can list two dependents on your IRS 1040.

My nine month old granddaughter Haley gets rather distressed when she's hungry, and she lets it be known that she needs a bottle. She is dependent on my son or daughter-in-law to feed her. My aging in-laws are battling serious health issues and rely more and more on Linda and me to make decisions for them that they can no longer make for themselves. They are, in many ways, dependent on us.

Yes, dependence is fine for young children or sick adults—even essential. But in time, as we grow up most of us move from dependence to independence.

Independence means we can do it on our own, without assistance. We see the beginnings of independence in toddlers and pre-schoolers when they cry out “Me do it! Me do it!” And in the adolescent years we see the move to independence even more strongly expressed in various acts of seeming rebellion, as older boys and girls, now approaching adulthood, try on their wings. Our four year old grandson Zack gets very put out if you won't let him use a glass and insist on a plastic cup. *He* can manage a glass. *He's* a big boy! CRASH!

This past week on the Youth Group's mission trip it would have been much easier for me to make all the decisions like where to eat and who would work on which project, but it was important to recognize the adolescent need to express a measure of independence.

Yes, learning to be independent is a vital part of growing up, and for most of us, a vital part of being an adult. It is important to be able to stand on your own.

But there is yet another way, as St. Paul put it, and that is the way of mature love. It is a way that is the best of both worlds, one that brings us to the third word, interdependence, so the kids made some of those decisions themselves.

Interdependence means I need you and you need me and working together we can both live more fully, more richly.

One of the first times young people often learn the real value and importance of interdependence is when they are in college.

When our son Matt was in school he shared an apartment for awhile with two friends. None of them could afford the apartment on their own, but together they could make a go of it. They all agreed to split the rent and the utilities three ways, and, as I remember, they each bought their own groceries. They took turns doing the housework—though as one could see when one visited, it wasn't high on any of their lists!

All went well for a couple of months, but then one of Matt's friends kept missing the rent due date, and the other didn't buy his own groceries and kept mooching off the others. At the end of the year they decided to go their own ways, and Matt, or more accurately, we, ended up with two or three months of back due electric bills. Had everyone behaved interdependently, it would have worked. But they didn't.

And that may be why we tend to veer in one direction or the other. In many ways dependence and independence are far easier than interdependence. It takes real effort to be willing to appropriately give and appropriately take. When we don't however, power and resources tend to be held by only a few, while others merely scrape by.

For Christians the clue to making interdependence work is found in this morning's scripture reading. It is as potent statement about our mutual need for one another and for God as you will find.

Jesus is addressing the crowds that followed him from town to town and he issues an invitation: "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens," he says, "and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) How, a listener might ask, how will you do that, Jesus? Good question!

It's important to note, Jesus doesn't say, "Well, I'll pick you up and carry you on my back, and you won't have to lift a finger." He doesn't say "I'll make you totally dependent on me." And, conversely, he doesn't say I'll do the heavy work so that you can run off and do as you please. I'll make you independent of all responsibility—free as a bird!

No, what he says is, "Take my yoke upon you, and you will find rest for your souls." (11:29)

Most of us have minimal familiarity with agriculture. But a yoke, in case you don't know, is a device for sharing the workload. It is made of wood or leather and usually has two openings. Two oxen each place their heads through a hole. A harness is attached to the yoke, and as they pull the wagon or plow, the load is shared equally. While neither one could pull the plow on their own for very long, together they can create furrows in the soil from dawn to dusk.

Together, Jesus says, we can do what's needed. And working together recognizing our mutual need, being truly interdependent, we can accomplish great things!

Sometimes this passage is lifted up as a call to passivity. Just lay down your burdens and let Jesus carry the load! But I think it is better understood as a call to action—and a call to interdependence.

So how can we apply these words on this Independence Day weekend?

On a personal level, we can remember that we do not have to go it alone. God stands ready to share the burden, to help with the load. We will still have to work at life, but it will be work with a partner and a purpose. Work that may leave us tired at the end of the day, but not spiritually exhausted.

As families, these words can inspire us to find new ways to share responsibilities and tasks. It is quite appropriate for children to take on some household chores. It is important to Dads to chip in at home. It is quite OK for Moms to want and need to work outside the home. Aside from the very, very young, and those who are sick, every family member can contribute. Everyone can appropriately give as well as appropriately take.

As a church we can remember that we all can bring talents and resources to the table. We can make sure those in spiritual, emotional or physical need are helped in the best ways possible—and when called on to help, we can stand ready to say yes. We need all sorts of people to be the kind of church God calls us to be. We need each other to do it! And as we recognize our interdependence, our need for God and each other, we will succeed.

As a nation we can remember that we are only as strong as the weakest among us. We can find ways to assure that the basic needs of all our citizens are met, including the need to contribute! We can, for instance, not only shelter the homeless, but also work through organizations like Habitat for Humanity, as our youth group did this past week. Such work helps to address the long term housing issues. Not a hand out, as they say, but a hand up.

And as the richest, most powerful nation on earth, we can make a huge difference when we take seriously organizations like the United Nations. I haven't read enough about John Bolton to know if he will make a good ambassador to the UN—I leave that to you to study and decide. But I do know it is one of the most crucial positions in our government, and should be treated as a real way to work with others on issues of global importance.

And as a world, as an ever shrinking planet, we can, and must, come to recognize that globalization will ultimately be either our destruction or the means to our survival. If it is simply a tool for concentrating power and resources in the hands of

a few nations problems like terrorism, AIDS and rampant hunger and starvation, will never be resolved. But if it is a tool for sharing limited natural resources, if it is a tool for sharing capital and labor, it can be used to transform our planet. As the leaders of the eight most powerful nations on earth meet this week at the G8 Summit, we can all pray that they understand interdependence.

Over the next couple of nights fireworks will be set off around the nation to mark the birthday of our great nation. And as they light up the sky, we must all remember to be grateful for our national independence and our personal freedoms.

But I hope you will also pause to consider that burdens only become lighter for all when they are shared. To survive, we truly need God, and one another. We need to be interdependent.

Happy Birthday, America—might God indeed bless us for years to come. And might we be a blessing to the world. For we are all in this together.

**Amen
John H. Danner**