

**July 4, 2021**

**6th Sunday after Pentecost**

**2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

**Mark 6:1-13**

**Pastor Ann Hultquist**

“What does America mean to you?” We might be thinking about that question this weekend, in between the fireworks, fun and food and maybe some traveling. After a contentious few years and a terribly difficult pandemic year plus, that question actually might be on our minds more this 4th of July.

If we remember our history, we know that today is the day when the Declaration of Independence was adopted in Philadelphia. Despite Abigail Adams' plea to her husband to “remember the ladies,” the Declaration says “we hold these truths to be self-evident that all *men* are created equal.” It’s a stirring phrase, but we know now that it just meant some men, certainly not *all people*. That *all* is a work in progress, isn’t it, both for our country and for our faith communities.

“What does America mean to you?” The iconic jingle “Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet” tried to sum it up for us years ago. There’s a lot of nostalgia in those words for a time that for most of us never quite existed that perfectly; and we probably realize in 2021 that that specific nostalgia only speaks to some of us who call America home.

So how would you answer that question? Listen to what some 5th graders in Ely, MN wrote. Anya said: *My first thing is gender equality. I choose this one because I’m a girl and I play hockey. If I wasn’t allowed to play hockey or vote just because I am a girl, I would be really mad.*

Wyatt said: *to have rights, a chance to be yourself, to do what you want, do the job that we want, and say what you want.*

I’m just guessing but I wonder if many of us would off the cuff say most of the same things he wrote? Our rights as individuals, our independence from one another and from authority really shapes what we think about our country and our lives.

And yet today we hear scripture readings that are also meant to shape our lives, scripture readings that are a Declaration of *Interdependence*, to coin a phrase. In this second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes with force. He loves these people, he lived with them for over a year, preaching and teaching about Jesus, encouraging and gathering them. Now he's heard that other preachers have come to the city, preachers who say they are better than Paul and stronger than Paul in their life and in their teaching about Jesus.

What would you do if you heard that folks at your workplace or school or maybe in your own family were saying that you weren't qualified, were incompetent, or in fact, were kinda wimpy? You'd stand up for yourself, right? "That's not true," we might say. "I'm a strong person. I'm smart. I know my stuff. I have experience." If you know Paul's writings you know that he does a fair amount of that in other letters--but here, in today's verses, he tells a story of weakness. *Weakness*. He's not some super-apostle, super hero blazing a trail on his own.

And did you notice that when Jesus goes home he runs smack into a wall of skepticism? "Where does he get his ideas?" they say. "We know his mom, his brothers and sisters. He's nothing special."

Jesus doesn't counter their accusations, does he? He responds with an action--an action that says "It's not really just about me"--and sends the disciples out and into ministry *together* with a partner. They go out to preach and to heal, dependent on one another, dependent on others in a community, and along the way they *form* a community of those who follow Jesus.

It's the life that Jesus calls the disciples, calls us into when he says in John's Gospel "I am the vine. You are the branches. Abide in me. Love one another as I have loved you." There are no independent contractors when it comes to faith. Just followers of Jesus who are *interdependent* on one another and on Christ, whose love poured out on the cross invites us into a different way of living--not just for ourselves but for the sake of others.

It's hard to remember that invitation, isn't it--surrounded by individualism, the encouragement to get our own personal "brand" out there, and this weekend's celebrations of freedom to do *as we want*. Following Jesus asks us to put all of that to the side and instead ask ourselves what the One we follow wants. What does it mean when we hear God's words of promise directed not just at Paul, but at ourselves: "My grace is sufficient for you."

Maybe after these pandemic months, after these months of cries for social justice, we've learned again how *interdependent* we are on one another for help, support, care, hope, healing and value. Perhaps that realization is one to celebrate this day.

The invitation is always there--the invitation that Paul responded to: the paradox that in serving and loving, in generosity and humility--actions that might seem weak--there is actually strength, and the Spirit of Christ at work in us.