

On Independence Day, and Blowing Things Up

*Homily, 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C, July 1, 2007, St. Mary's Visitation Parish
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Of all the major holidays on the American calendar, essentially all but two have Catholic origins. The two exceptions, those that are supposed to be about our uniquely American heritage, history, and identity, are Thanksgiving and July 4th.

It's fascinating to consider that for those two very American holidays, our celebrations really revolve around two rituals. One of them, on Thanksgiving, is the ritual of stuffing ourselves with food until we pass out and then watch the Detroit Lions lose to whoever they are playing that day. The other ritual, the one for July 4th, simply involves blowing things up. Anything- doesn't matter what it is, as long as it makes pretty colors when it explodes. So, how American is that? Our two uniquely American holidays are about over-eating and exploding things.

Now, I'm not down on blowing things up, don't mistake me. I did a lot of that when I was a kid, and I enjoy it, and I'll probably do more of it this year, so that's fine. But, as a ritual for July 4th, the notion of blowing things up requires some reflection.

For us the practice calls to mind certain cultural values: independence, freedom, power, a lack of restraints, liberty, the frontier, the glory of our past—all of that is wrapped up in it. Freedom is in our blood, and as Americans we speak about it a great deal and toss the word around continually.

But I don't think we really know what it means. It's a bit like the word "love." We use it continually, but we seldom reflect on its true meaning.

So, having ruined Christmas, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, and probably several other holidays with my preaching thus far, I thought I'd take a shot at July 4th. And by the way, that just leaves Halloween and I have plenty of time to get to that one- fear not.

I want to touch on three things: what freedom actually is, what threatens freedom, and what saves or redeems freedom.

To start off with, it's worth listening again to the opening paragraph from the second reading for today's Mass, taken from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. Here is what he says: "Brothers and Sisters: for freedom, Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. For you were called for freedom, brothers and sisters. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love."

In other words, freedom has a specific purpose- it is not an end in and of itself, and it can be misused, even to the point of leading to slavery. Freedom is the ability to do what is right, true, and good. It's NOT the ability to do whatever we want to do- that's called license, and Americans often get the two confused. To put in another way, we are free to choose our actions, but we are not free to re-define what is good and true, or we are not free to re-define what brings true freedom. That stuff is already built into our human nature.

When we use our sense of choice for the good of others, for the truth, for the right, then our freedom brings us closer to God. That is part of St. Paul's point. That is why God gave us free will- so that we could choose to become closer to him. In fact, our own free will is one of the ways that we are the most like our creator- God too is free. And, our own freedom is the one attribute of ours that God upholds above everything else- he will never compromise it. Which means that we are free to either love God and others, or to hurt God and others.

So freedom is not as simple as falling off a log, or throwing off the British Empire in the case of American history. Freedom requires practice- it's learned and strengthened, and if it's misused, then it's undermined.

In the 1700's, the threats to American freedom were often thought of in political and external terms. Threats came from the native peoples, or the French or the British. Threats to freedom were not necessarily thought of as coming from within, and part of the reason for that is that the colonies had in common a moral fabric and understanding about the need for faith, ethics, and law.

Today, on the other hand, it's worth thinking about where threats to freedom come from, because the situation has changed. I would submit that they are now more internal than external. What threatens freedom? It's not the British, and I think we can agree it's certainly not the French.

Some threats are these. For one: ignorance. Ignorance threatens freedom and undermines it. Ignorance of history, of doctrine, of philosophy, of culture, of God. We don't know how to use our freedom all by ourselves- someone needs to teach us. So the exercise of freedom in a healthy way requires knowledge.

Another threat, and this is the most basic, is sin. Sin makes us slaves to our passions- in a life of sin, there is no freedom. That is one of St. Paul's main arguments. For example, ask a smoker, or an alcoholic, or someone who is an addict of any sort, if they think they are truly free. If they are honest with you, they'll tell you that they're not. That's because their passions have taken over, and actions have formed into habits, and now something has them by the throat that they can't say "no" to. Lust, malice, envy, anger, pride- all of those things undermine true freedom. They all lead to slavery.

A third threat is consumerism- the cult of stuff. Try living in this culture without a car. Or without a mortgage. Or without a credit card. Frankly, most of us are not free to, because our stuff owns us- we are slaves to want, and to all of the work that goes into maintaining our lifestyle.

Which leads to a fourth threat: that of the calendar, work, and activities. In this country, we are not free to rest- ever. There is always one more piece of paperwork, yardwork, house work, home work. Or another soccer practice, swim meet, etc, etc. We are slaves to work and to activity.

And, one last one: secularism and unbelief is a threat to freedom. We cannot live in a culture that denies a place for morality rooted in faith. Faith and ethics allow for laws to be followed, which allows for safety, which allows for freedom. Try walking alone at night in the inner city. You can't do it. Try praying publicly at a public high school graduation; try being opposed to a secular position at UW Madison- it is secularism that undermines freedom, either by denying faith a place,

or by breaking down the social fabric that guarantees the social order necessary for freedom to flourish.

All of those things are threats to freedom. They are all examples of freedom misused. The bible doesn't threaten freedom, God doesn't threaten freedom, the Catholic Church doesn't threaten freedom. WE are the one's who threaten freedom- the biggest danger to it is always our own poor actions.

So, if all of that is true, then what is it that saves or redeems freedom? Well, quite simply, the opposite of a lot of what I already mentioned.

For one, knowledge saves and protects freedom. Knowledge of Scripture, the Catechism, philosophy, logic- any sort of training in faith and right conduct. Knowledge teaches us how to properly direct our freedom.

Also, the Sabbath. The day of rest that is Sunday protects freedom because it keeps us from becoming a slave to our activities and to our calendars. The reason why God was so insistent on a Sabbath rest was partly because he knew we would be consumed by our calendar if we didn't rest- and then we wouldn't be free.

Also, penance or fasting- some strides at simplicity of life. That brings freedom from our slavery to our stuff.

And, finally, and most essentially, Christ and the Sacraments bring true freedom. They keep us from being slaves to sin, as St. Paul put it so well today. Patrick Henry famously said: "Give me liberty, or give me death." That's a very nice phrase from our history, but unfortunately it's inadequate. Because the fact is, liberty, by itself, without Christ or truth, IS death. It is not an end in itself- it needs to be used for the good and the right. And history is full of tragic examples of how liberty misused has meant death.

To put it in another light, consider how Christ would rephrase that statement from Patrick Henry: "I will give you my death, so that you can have true liberty." Without Scripture, Christ's love and sacrifice, his truth; without confession, prayer, worship, the Sabbath- without these things, freedom suffers. Our passions take over, the culture turns in on itself, and America puts itself under the dictatorship and tyranny of unbelief and relativism. All of that is caught up in the deceptively simple concept of freedom.

So, this July 4th, go ahead and blow things up. And in the process, be reminded that freedom is not free, and that many died so that we could be free. But also remember, that the only death that brings true freedom and maintains it is our own dying to self- every day. If we don't do that, we consume each other as St. Paul warned us.

And, that very process of dying to self is only made possible by the death and resurrection of one man- Christ Jesus. We did not gain our independence in the year 1776. We gained it in the year 33AD. And if we don't turn to Christ as individuals and as a nation every day, then we'll lose God's most precious gift to us- the gift of our freedom.