

“And the Survey Said....!”
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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14; Joshua 24:14-15

Prayer

Most of you are familiar with the TV game show Family Feud in which two families are asked questions that have already been answered by 100 people. If the answer matches one of the concealed answers on the game board, the family scores points equal to the number of people in the survey who gave that answer. The participants are not asked questions about what is true or how things really are. Instead, they are asked questions about what *other people think* are true. Therefore, a perfectly logical answer may be considered incorrect because it failed to make the survey.

A few years ago on July 4, a reporter in handed a slip of paper to 122 people on the streets of Madison, Wisconsin. He asked them their opinion of the words written on it. These were the words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is right of the people to alter or abolish it."

Some of the folks said that they thought it was much too radical. Some said it was unrealistic idealism. Quite a few said that it was probably written by some extremist group. Others thought it was the work of some counterculture group. Only 13 out of 122 people recognized it as part of the Declaration of Independence.

Polls and surveys can be misleading and even dangerous. So much of our decisionmaking is based on polls, and public policy and political careers hinge on the latest polls. All of this raises the question of whether we should really want to be ruled by the will of the people. If we had direct vote on everything in this country, or even in the church, then whoever inspired the most people at any given moment would prevail. We see how public opinion can be manipulated so easily to gain support for war, economic stimulus, etc., even in a representative form of government.

The United States certainly was no experiment in democratic government. That had been tried 20 plus centuries earlier in the Greek City States. If you visit that part of the world, you can see the ruins, the remnants of the glory that had once been those states. But they failed, and they were destroyed. Why? Because their democracy had no religious or ethical basis. Freedom was not coupled with moral responsibility. The states became corrupt because the people were corrupt.

At the close of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as he left Independence Hall on the final day of deliberation, Benjamin Franklin was asked if we had a republic or a monarchy. Dr. Franklin responded, "A republic if you can keep it."

Historical Background

We claim that the United States of America is both a Christian nation and a democracy, yet that statement may reveal a lack of understanding about who we are and what our goal should be. Imagine, if you will the sequence of events leading up to the signing of a Declaration of Independence. Imagine Thomas Jefferson, sitting in the home of Jacob Graff, a bricklayer, his quill pen in hand carefully and meticulously choosing each phrase

for this Declaration. Imagine stacks of books and pamphlets by his side used in researching the ideas of other thinkers and his refusal to refer to any of them at the actual time of his writing.

On July 1, 1776 the debate begins over the document. On the first ballot only nine of thirteen colonies vote in favor of independence. Pennsylvania and South Carolina both vote no. Delaware and New York argue and disagree among themselves so these two colonies abstain. South Carolina's delegates say their colony would vote for independence if Pennsylvania and Delaware could be persuaded to change their vote. With a glimmer of hope John Adams and Richard Henry Lee quickly go to work to persuade those who oppose independence. Delaware's third delegate, Caesar Rodney stays away that day because he is suffering from cancer. A fast rider is sent on the 80 mile trip to his farm to inform him how much his vote is needed.

July 2, 1776 is a gray and humid day in Philadelphia. Flies and mosquitoes annoyed the delegates in the State House while they continue to debate independence and freedom. Caesar Rodney arrives exhausted from Delaware shortly after lunch riding since day break to vote for independence. Thus Delaware and Pennsylvania both vote yes. South Carolina swings in line behind the two, as its delegates promised, and the resolution of Independence passes 12-0 with the colony of New York abstaining. That afternoon the United Colonies became the United States. John Adams wrote to his wife saying; "The second of July 1776 will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival - 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."

Congress, however, is not as ready to celebrate as Adams. Yes they had voted for independence, but had not approved the document that would explain this decision to the world. July third and fourth find the temperatures on the rise, both inside and outside the State House. The delegates discuss word by word and phrase by phrase Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. A long and heated debate continues over Jefferson's paragraph condemning the slave trade. It is removed. The final text is adopted unanimously on the July 4, and freedom, liberty, and political independence is declared. What has happened to that nation that was created so deliberately two hundred thirty-three years ago? What has happened to the freedom and democracy that was so diligently crafted in those days?

We have all sung it: "Our father's God to thee, Author of liberty, to Thee we sing. Long may our land be bright, with freedom's holy light. Protect us by thy might, Great God, our King." Whatever else the establishment of the United States was, it was a Christian experiment. When the pilgrims came to America, it took them 23 years to pay for their own passage. They were blown 500 miles off their course, and so they didn't land in Virginia; they landed in Massachusetts. But when they finally stood on that rocky coast, they fell down on their knees and kissed the earth, and they wrote for all of history to find: "We establish this state to the glory of God and the spread of the Christian religion."

The Declaration has to do with the right of human beings to liberty. In its simplest terms, the struggle of human history has been the struggle for freedom. The Magna Carta stated in 1215, "A free man is to be free." It was the battle cry of the French Revolution: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." It was even in the Communist Manifesto (although communism never delivered the freedom it touted): "Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains." And there is the great promise of Scripture from our Lord himself: "If you continue in my word, you truly are my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31b-32)

Freedom of Choice

What then is freedom? What does it mean? Note that there can be no absolute freedom in our world. A person is free only within the predetermined limits established by our Creator. None of us can think seriously about our freedom until we ask the question: "What is our destiny? What is it toward which we are free to move?" Instead of shouting about our freedom, this nation should ask, not "What are we freed from?" but "What are we freed for?" That person or nation who merely shouts: "It's my life, and I'll live it the way I want to," has made two obviously incorrect statements: (1) It is not our life; and (2) we should not live it to please ourselves.

In 2 Chronicles 6 and 7, Solomon has built the great Temple and has prayed to God to accept it. In 2 Chronicles 7:12, God appears to Solomon in the night and assures him that God has heard his prayer. God tells Solomon that God has "chosen" this place, and therefore it's people. Then God goes on to matter-of-factly tell Solomon that there would be tough days ahead: no rain, locusts, pestilence. But then comes the hope in v.14: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

There is nothing here about taking a poll or checking a survey. The answer is in faithfulness to God and bringing our lives to him. The great comfort in this passage is that God recognizes that we will again have "wicked ways" even after he has blessed and chosen us. That does not mean we should do as we please without regard to God's purpose for our lives, relying on God's mercy and grace to literally pull us out of the fire later. God gave us understanding, and he expects us to use our God-given abilities, both as individuals and as a nation. In fact, the only way we can have God's favor as a nation is to order our lives individually in ways that honor him. We complain about our nation but assign the blame to others for the nation's problems.

Right and Wrong – Christian Character

Alan Hunt, former pastor of Mt. Pisgah UMC here in this Conference, has a radio show twice weekly on talk radio. He starts every program by saying that he is not there to discuss what's right and what's left, but rather what's right and what's wrong. We have couched everything in political terms for so long that we tend to demonize those who disagree with us. Instead of concentrating on what it takes to win the argument, the office, or the vote, we should be concentrating on what is right according to God's word.

Where is the courage to stand against the forces of evil and greed in our world? Where are those who would more closely follow the founding fathers? Where are those who will stand firmly for the worth of every individual as a creation in the image of God? More importantly, where are those who will stand in the face of the tyranny of sin and proclaim the hope of Christ as a better way? My brother-in-law, Stanley, serves Sandpoint UMC in Sandpoint, Idaho. If you leave his home in the panhandle of Idaho and travel east you soon go into Montana – Big Sky Country. There is a little town there called Hope. If you travel further east you get to the next town in Montana called Beyond Hope. Some of you think we are beyond hope, but I assure you that we are not. We simply have to claim our faith in the Author of true liberty, and we have to live out of that faith.

As the evil, the corruption, the crime in the community and nation grows, what do we do? Pass more laws? There are 35 million statutes on our books (that was before July 1) and still little improvement (And we thought ancient Israel had too many laws!). We increase the size of our police forces. We continue to build up our armed forces to protect our

island of freedom from the world. The Great Wall of China was built 210 years before Christ as a protection against the northern barbarians. Twenty feet high, 13 feet wide at the top, it stretched over hills and mountains and valleys for 1400 miles. There was a guard tower about every 100 yards. But the wall failed. The nation fell. The wall was crossed again and again. Why? The guards could be bribed. No nation is stronger than the character of its people, and laws and defenses do not produce character.

General Omar Bradley once said: "America today is running on the momentum of a Godly ancestry, and when that momentum runs down, God help America." General Bradley also said, "We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his great "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Consider the story of A.J. Muste. During the Vietnam War, this man, then in his early eighties, stood in front of the White House night after night with a candle. Sometimes others joined him. Sometimes he stood alone. One night a reporter interviewed him as he stood there in the rain. "Mr. Muste," the reporter said, "Do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here with a candle?" A.J. Muste answered, "Oh I don't do this to change the country. I do this so this country won't change me."

A Time To Choose

We cannot allow the popular culture and popular ideas to separate us from the godly purposes for which you and I were created. It is not what the survey says but what God has said that has enduring value. When we go with the majority rather than with God, we place our own salvation in jeopardy and imperil the future of the land we love. In Matthew 15:7-9, Jesus said, "You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips. But their hearts are far from me; in vain they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"

Joshua, nearing the end of his life, challenged all of Israel at Shechem in Joshua 24:14-15. He said, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve..., But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

There is always a choice, and when we choose not to serve God, we have by default chosen to serve something or someone else. The choices you and I make today determine the future of our eternal souls and the future of this great land whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. I hold in my hand the answers to life's problems and the answer to the problems facing this country. But only you have the power to bring these answers into the arena of public opinion. You see, we must work for the day when the survey says what God says – when popular opinion will be in sync with the will of God.

On this 233rd birthday of the United States of America, let us be able to say with those who signed that great Declaration to the world: "Appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, with firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

Prayer

End Notes:

1. Quotes from Benjamin Franklin are from the notes of Dr. James McHenry, one of Maryland's delegates to the Convention.
2. Background on the Declaration of Independence is from the Library of Congress: http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/abt_declar.html

Although Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston comprised the committee charged with drafting the Declaration, the task fell to Jefferson, regarded as the strongest and most eloquent writer. The document is mainly his work, although the committee and Congress as a whole made a total of 86 changes to Jefferson's draft.

As a scholar well-versed in the ideas and ideals of the French and English Enlightenments, Jefferson found his greatest inspiration in the language and arguments of English philosopher John Locke, who had justified England's "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 on the basis of man's "natural rights." Locke's theory held that government was a contract between the governed and those governing, who derived their power solely from the consent of the governed and whose purpose it was to protect every man's inherent right to property, life and liberty. Jefferson's theory of "natural law" differed in that it substituted the inalienable right of "the pursuit of happiness" for "property," emphasizing that happiness is the product of civic virtue and public duty. The concept of the "pursuit of happiness" originated in the Common Sense School of Scottish philosophy, of which Lord Kames was the best-known proponent.

Jefferson emphasized the contractual justification for independence, arguing that when the tyrannical government of King George III of England repeatedly violated "natural law," the colonists had not only the right but the duty to revolt.

The assembled Continental Congress deleted a few passages of the draft, and amended others, but outright rejected only two sections: 1) a derogatory reference to the English people; 2) a passionate denunciation of the slave trade. The latter section was left out, as Jefferson reported, to accede to the wishes of South Carolina and Georgia, who wanted to continue the importation of slaves. The rest of the draft was accepted on July 4, and 56 members of Congress began their formal signing of the document on August 2, 1776.

3. Story of A. J. Muste from Andrea Ayzvian, *The Sun*, Nov. 1994.
4. "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."(The Declaration of Independence)

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."(The Constitution of the United States of America)

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." (Pledge of Allegiance)

Following is part of the poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazrus that is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty.

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"(The New Colossus)

These are all calls to freedom. These words represent the ideals that we believe in and want our nation and government to be built on.

5. Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free. -- Ronald Reagan
6. "We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the House, they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel."
- Benjamin Franklin (From the debates at the Constitutional Convention, June of 1787)
7. French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting America in 1831, said, "I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!"
8. "Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought."
- Pope John Paul II
9. Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."
- John Adams
10. "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."
- Edmund Burke