

**Sermon :: 21-June-2026**  
**Proper 7, Year A**

“ Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth ”

I was a true ‘child of the Bicentennial.’ I was born in 1966, so I was in second and third grade during all the run-up ... and there was a *lot* of run-up! ... to the celebration of America’s two-hundredth birthday in 1976. Some of you may remember the nightly “Bicentennial Minute” on CBS ... the tall ships sailing up the Hudson ... the Bicentennial quarter ... Elton John’s “Philadelphia Freedom”<sup>1</sup> ... and an explosion of red-white-and-blue virtually everywhere one looked. I played General Cornwallis surrendering at Yorktown in my third-grade spring play which recounted the ‘highlights’ of the Revolutionary War ... and over those two years, as *I* remember, we watched the Disney film BEN AND ME<sup>2</sup>—about Benjamin Franklin and Amos the Mouse, who, apparently, was the one *actually* responsible for the wording of the Declaration of Independence—*countless* times during our weekly school assemblies.

I grew up just fifteen minutes outside of Philadelphia, and so, there were *many* more trips across the bridge than usual that year ... for fireworks ... to see Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, Elfreth’s Alley<sup>3</sup> and Betsy Ross’ house ... to hear ‘Ben Franklin’ tell stories at Old Christ Church.<sup>4</sup> And, of course, I remember July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976, *itself*: my sister and me under the dining room table during breakfast, as the whole family watched the day’s festivities unfold on an eighteen-inch television—black-and-white, at that! ... then, a *huge* party with all the neighbors ... and finally, a *monumental* fireworks display over the Museum of Art (not yet graced by a statue of Rocky).<sup>5</sup>

All of this say: I am a little disappointed ... a little nostalgic ... a little—well, no, make that a *lot*—*underwhelmed* ... by the run-up to *this* year’s celebration of our semiquincentennial (say *that* ten times, fast!). I *know* the times are different ... I *know* a lot has changed ... I *know* we’re now two ‘clicks’ past the “Greatest Generation” and almost as many past Apollo 11. I *know* that even though, as a nation, we’ve made an *incredible* amount of *progress* in the last fifty years ... we *still* have an incredible amount *left to make*, as well. I *know* the upbeat, feel-good ... and, at the *same* time, blinkered and less-questioning ... ‘vibe’ of 1976 America no longer prevails.

But the *traditionalist* in me ... the *ritualist* in me ... and, candidly, the *American* in me ... doesn’t want this country’s milestone birthday to pass without at least a *little* attention ... a *bit* of thought ... a *modicum* of reflection. So, today we’re beginning a three-part sermon series that looks—ever so glancingly; probably even superficially—first, *back* at the *founding* of the United States ... asking how Jesus *was* ‘in’ our history *back then*; and then, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, *ahead*, to the *future* of the United States ... asking how He *should* be ‘in’ *our future*. And today, I’ll start with the Declaration of Independence: the one *Thomas Jefferson* wrote, not Amos the Mouse (!).

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<sup>1</sup> Although he denies any connection between the song and the U.S. Bicentennial.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben\\_and\\_Me](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_and_Me).

<sup>3</sup> This is the oldest continuously lived-on street in America.

<sup>4</sup> Church of England (although this would have meant little to me then, as my family was Presbyterian); founded in 1695.

<sup>5</sup> Full disclosure: We watched the July 4<sup>th</sup> Art Museum fireworks from a parking lot tucked along the eastern bank of the Delaware River. We had actually gone *to* the museum for the fireworks on December 31, 1975 ... and had all almost come home with frostbite. Perhaps the ensuing six months hadn’t been sufficient to erase my parents’ trauma!

The Declaration of Independence is, *ultimately*, a document of dissolution ... a proclamation of parting ... a rationalization of rupture. It is the *historic ending* of a colonial relationship ... but one that *begins* with a fundamental tenet of God's creation: the inherent *dignity* and intrinsic *worthiness* of *every one* of God's creatures ... even as, I must acknowledge, the *Founders'* eighteenth-century understanding of equality-in-the-eyes-of-God extended only to white men—and preferably those with property: a long tradition of cramped—even cruel—theology reaching back even to Abraham and Sarah's horrific treatment of Hagar in our Old Testament lesson today.

While the lengthy 'bill of particulars' against King George III and his government, which comprises the *bulk* of the Declaration, may no longer spark, in us, the outrage and grievance it no doubt fired in its *original* audience<sup>6</sup> ... the language of the Declaration's *preamble* still stirs, even as we update its wording a bit<sup>7</sup>:

We hold these truths to be *self-evident*[:] that *all* [people] are created *equal*[;] that they are endowed by their Creator with certain [*in*]alienable rights[;] that among these are *Life, Liberty* and *the pursuit of Happiness*. ¶That to *secure* these rights, Governments are instituted among [people], *deriving* their just powers from the *consent* of the governed (all emphases supplied).

Although Jesus was neither a political philosopher nor a civil rights leader<sup>8</sup> ... I don't think He would much quibble or take issue with this noble 'platform' for the founding of a nation. Yes, He'd probably set these ideals within a more expressly theological, spiritual *frame* ... and also insist upon naming—indeed, on *singing!*—the poor and the marginalized; the oppressed and the scapegoated, whom He came to serve and save. But at the *same* time, I think, He'd rather readily recognize the 'fingerprints' of God in the Declaration's pithy summary of the human condition as (we believe) God *intends* it: ¶the equal personhood, of inestimable value and intrinsic dignity, of *all*; ¶a liberty of individual conscience and lifepath that is gifted us by the Creator and requires no other human being's acknowledgement or acquiescence; ¶the necessary latitude—indeed, the hallowed *opportunity*—that allows *all* to explore and exploit the *full* potential that resides within *each* of us<sup>9</sup>; and finally, ¶the inherent and vital *obligation* of any civil government we may constitute among ourselves ... to act in ways that continue to elicit *our* ongoing *consent* to the authority we've ceded to it ... or else, face being *de-constituted*,<sup>10</sup> for being contrary not only to *our* rights ... but also to the *will* of the *Creator*.

Indeed, this final *de-constituting* ... this *rejecting* and *overthrowing* ... this 'hands off'; 'do not tread' ... *turn* ... is what *founds* us, as a nation. The Declaration of Independence is, in the end, a justification for *sundering bonds* ... for *breaking off relationship* ... for *cleaving connections* ... between the governor and the governèd. The Declaration's stated intent is ¶"*dissolve* the political bands [that] have connected [one people] with another"; ¶expressly to "assume ... the *separate* station to which the Laws of ... God entitle" us; ¶to declare "free[dom]" and "indep[en]dence" ... sovereignty and self-rule ... an "*absol[ution]* from all [*a*]llegiance" and the *dissolution* of "all ... *connection*."

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<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that a very sizable portion of the American colonists (including virtually all of the Church of England priests (then, no doubt, called PRESBYTERS) ministering in the colonies) were not ready to ... even saw no need to—and actively opposed any movement to ... separate from Great Britain.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, to make it more reflective of the ideals it seeks to communicate.

<sup>8</sup> Or *wasn't* He?!? And does it surprise you to hear this modern appellation applied to the likes of Adams (particularly Sam), Jefferson and Madison?

<sup>9</sup> Some natively; some via education and encouragement.

<sup>10</sup> I made this term up.

And above all else, it's this *separation*—this *right to separate-ness*—that echoes most resoundingly from Philadelphia across two-and-a-half centuries ... not only as a code for *nation-states* but also as a creed of *individual liberty*: the highly prized, jealously guarded, passionately declared right of the *individual* to *reject* the power and not *recognize* the authority of the *collective* over her or him ... the fundamental right to go it *alone*, if and as one so chooses. The Declaration is a paean to *radical* self-rule ... to *maximal* personal freedom ... to the *inviolable* boundaries of the *individual*. This infant nation's first official public utterance is a stark "Hands off!": "off" the God-given, God-gifted 'I' ... who will not be bound or constrained, taken advantage of or repressed by any *other* 'I' ... without *this 'I's' consent!*

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We're apt to instinctively *blanch* ... spiritually *recoil* ... when we hear Jesus say, "Do not think that I have come to bring *peace* to the earth; I have *not* come to bring *peace* [ | ] but a *sword*." This doesn't *sound* like Jesus, to our twenty-first-century, Western, peace-accustomed ears. But what He's *saying* is that although His way—*God's way*—*is* the ultimate *good*, and also the ultimate *destiny*, for humanity ... we, as His disciples, must *also* confront and contend with the uncomfortable reality that there are *many* in this world who are *desperately* wedded to and jealous of the power *they've* accumulated ... the priorities *they've* set ... the positions *they* occupy. Therefore, *getting* to God's ultimate good ... *realizing* God's ultimate destiny ... *will* sometimes require *conflict* ... *adversity* ... and maybe even *separating* ourselves from those with whom our faith in Christ doesn't let us *agree*.

Jesus calls us, then, to assert, pursue—and sometimes even *fight* for—what we know to be *His universal* truth ... over against those whose *own* version of truth doesn't accommodate *His*. Do not shrink, I think He's telling us, from *proclaiming* what *you* know, from *Me*, to be *right*. Do not hesitate, He's encouraging us, to *overturn* what *you* know, from *Me*, to be *oppressive* or *unloving*, *inequitable* or *unjust*. And do not quail at the prospect of *separating* from ... of declaring your *independence* from ... the beliefs, behaviors and bullying of others who aren't working for the *same* peace—the *true* peace—that *I* (Jesus) came to bring.

Go your *own* way, Jesus tells us—the way *I* have shown you. ¶Go it lovingly, but also *courageously*. ¶Go it responsibly, but also *resolutely*. ¶Go it humbly, but also *prophetically*: speaking Eternal truth to mortal power. For when you go it with *Me* ... you go it with *God* ... and you *never* go it *alone*.

Two hundred fifty years ago, when the Founders in Philadelphia prayed to Jesus, they, no doubt, *heard* different *words* ... but they, *also* no doubt, *received* the exact same *message*.

... Although that's also not *all* of Jesus' message ... and this is where we'll begin, *next* week.

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