

More than four hundred years ago, the earliest Baptists that emerged in England and Holland, held tight to the idea of a believer's baptism. Back in those days, to be baptized into the Anglican Church was to also become a citizen of England, because the Church and State were one. Our faith ancestors believed this to be a coercive practice; no reasonable person would refuse baptism, because to do so would be to forfeit additional rights. And of course, what infant would be of sound enough mind to make such a weighty decision?

Instead, these new clusters of practicing Christians believed that people should enter baptismal waters only when they were compelled by the Holy Spirit. Additionally, they believed that each person had soul freedom – that is the full right to be the judge of their own spiritual competency, a matter for individual and Creator alone.

These ideas seem rather innocuous in 2021, but in 17th Century England (and the 18th and 19th centuries, too!), such talk was tantamount to treason. And many of the earliest Baptists were drowned for their beliefs, a really cruel way to disparage their practice of adult immersion.

As we gather this morning, on the Fourth of July, I hope it's not lost on you that generations of our ancestors suffered abuse, torment, ridicule, loss of status and livelihood, property and home, even death for their determination to be bound to the liberty of conscience.

We get to be Sardis – that is we get to be a community where free souls are encouraged to seek the divine, to share their God-given gifts with one another, and to express their theology without fear of shame, threat, or regret – we get to be Sardis, because our predecessors ensured such freedoms. As a matter of fact, several Baptists were

signers of the Declaration of Independence, and insisted that religious liberty be a tenant of their new nation.

But if we're honest, we also know that while our faith ancestors worked tirelessly to secure the religious freedoms of privileged people, more often than not, they did so at the direct expense of Indigenous, African, and Caribbean peoples, as well as women. Slavery, colonization, patriarchy, commerce, war, extinction, segregation, assimilation have all been justified as necessary evils in the propagation of gospel. And the lingering effects of such justification still haunt us, wound us, us, limit us today.

So...there's a tension. For Two-Hundred-Forty-Five Years, a wonderful document has articulated some of the highest values of humanity: the equality of all persons, and the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And yet ALL persons has too often meant SOME persons.

In today's passage, we meet a man before he's famous. He's grown up being told about a God who promises life – that is a world where a person's needs are met, where their value is recognized, where they find symmetry and harmony with their neighbors, where their gifts are an expression of God's love and God's good purposes in the world. And this man is steeped in a jubilee world – that's an environment where neighbor, land, and God live in covenant with one another, a pattern of ongoing renewal and hope. But when Jesus comes back home to preach the very same message he has been taught by his faith community, he is rejected by his village.

And afterwards, he'll send his disciples out two by two; they are equipped with the same knowledge and authority. And chances are,

they'll be met with similar skepticism. Sure, everyone knows about the high ideals, it's just that most people don't really believe that such ideals or expectations should be met. And like Jesus, they'll heal a few folks, and love on a few folks, and share a meal or two, and engage in sacred conversations. And they'll go on to the next village, looking for a few more folks to share in this life. And just like our founding fathers, and just like you and me, they'll struggle with making this full life for everybody accessible to more than just the somebodies of the world.

Today, on July 4th, 2021, we gather as citizens of a country that tells us our potential is possible. And we read from sacred texts that tell us about a God whose love can transcend the expectations and imagination of this world: individual lives can change; communities can be transformed; God's world can once more be God's world.

But I gotta tell you, I don't wanna keep talking about the possible if we aren't willing to do the work of making it reality. I don't want to live in a world where my neighbor might thrive; I want to live in a world where my neighbor does thrive. I don't want to theorize about what might happen if we got to hear a hometown prophet; I want to be part of a community that regularly engages with prophets from every zip code in our city, and provoked by their challenges, responds to the needs of neighbors near and far. I don't want to simply wake up people to injustice in order that we might prove our righteousness; I want to be part of a community that strives to awaken forgiveness, and openness, and creativity, and healing, and reconciliation, re-purposing, and welcomes people into such an endeavor.

Listen, fire up the grill, run through the sprinkler, shoot off some fireworks...you've earned it! But how about afterwards, you try to be receptive to the prophets among you? And maybe grab a buddy, and

take some leftover casserole to your neighbor, or ask them if they want light a bottle rocket, too? Or maybe just imagine expressing your love to others as a way to help realize equality and life for those around us? And then do it again the next day, and the next, and the next. And keep on doing it!!!

Sure, we may have to shake a little dust off our feet. But a few more people getting to experience the fullness of life...yeah, I'd say that's worth it!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.