

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 9 -- Year B
July 4, 2021 -- Independence Day
Ezekiel 2:1-5; St. Mark 6:1-13
Second Corinthians 2:7b-10

Ah, yes, Independence Day, the Fourth of July -- parades, barbecue, fireworks, family gatherings, maybe an afternoon at the pool or a picnic in the park. Ah, yes, Independence Day, the Fourth of July -- with maybe a passing thought to those Founding Fathers who on this day wrote something about an "inalienable right" to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." We hear those words from the opening of the Declaration of Independence, and we have a picture in our mind of a group of distinguished and well-dressed men, standing together and signing the Declaration. And, perhaps, we pay scant attention to the words that closed that Declaration, wherein they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. They quite literally were putting their lives and everything they held dear "on the line" for the cause of independence. They had no guarantee of success; they would be going against the military might of the world's most powerful empire. What they were doing would be regarded by much of the world -- and by many of their neighbors, friends, and relatives -- as treason. It has become popular in some circles in recent years to denigrate these men -- and yes, they were mostly men -- for accommodating themselves to the economic system in which they lived. But, make no mistake, they were willing to put their lives on the line in the cause which they believed was just and right and non-negotiable. How easily we can forget that, had they been any less successful, they would have been captured, tried, and executed, ...and remembered by history as failures and traitors. But, in signing that document, they were committing themselves and summoning others to a higher cause and to a greater loyalty.

In other words, we can look back and just assume that the story had to turn out the way that it did and can fail to appreciate the extraordinary risks they took in doing what they did -- of which today we now are the beneficiaries.

By the sixth chapter of Mark's Gospel there were no guarantees of success for Jesus's disciples. While Jesus had appeared to have achieved some early measures of success, such early successes can be illusory. As we heard two weeks ago, Jesus's own family now thought He was out of His mind. As we heard moments ago, those in His hometown, those who presumably knew Him well, were starting to take offense at Him, ...as well they might. After all, His proclamation of the coming of a new and very different kind of Kingdom could only cause problems, especially with those who were loyal to the supremely powerful king back in Rome or to the puppet king just down the road in Galilee. Indeed, the high priest was far from the only one to insist, "We have no king but Caesar."

But, now Jesus seems to be determined to declare His independence from the prevailing powers-that-be, be they religious or political or even demonic. He has committed Himself and has been summoning others to a higher cause and to a greater loyalty. And, now He has gathered a group of not-very-distinguished and not-very-well-dressed men and sent them out to do the same. What they were doing would be (and still is) regarded by much of the world -- and by many of their neighbors, friends, and relatives -- as foolishness (or worse). Those who proclaimed any kingship, other than that of Caesar and his puppet kings -- well, there was usually a price to be paid for that. And, the disciples would be the ones paying it. They may not have used the phrase about "our lives, our fortune, and our sacred honor," but something like that may well have been on their minds.

(I know that some of us are fond of pointing out that Mark's Gospel generally portrays the disciples as a bunch of dunderheads who just don't get it, but today's Gospel reading gives us a somewhat different picture, as Jesus sends them out to summon God's people to a higher cause and to a greater loyalty, as Jesus sends them out to announce that "the Kingdom of God is at hand," a challenge to the prevailing powers, be they religious or political or even demonic.)

Just as it took extraordinary courage for the Founding Fathers to take on the military might of the entire British empire and to do so with such limited resources, so it took extraordinary courage for those disciples of Jesus to go out and to take on the prevailing powers of their day and to do so with such limited resources, "no bread, no bag, no money in their belts."

Dare we suggest that on this day, when we celebrate the courage that it took for the founding of this nation, that we reflect on today's Gospel reading and celebrate the courage that it took for the founding of the Church -- of which we today are now the beneficiaries? The disciples were sent out in the belief that their summoning of God's people to a higher cause and to a greater loyalty was just and right and non-negotiable. For their summons was to a greater loyalty to the God who is author of life and liberty and the source of the healing mercy and the saving grace which sustains us. And, that summons is to be our summons, as well. And, how easily we can forget that, had the disciples been any less successful, they could have been captured, tried, and executed. Oh, wait! That's right! The One who sent them out, the One who sends us out, was! Amen