

Fifty

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(Galatians 5:1, 13-25 NRSV) For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. {13} For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. {14} For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." {15} If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. {16} Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. {17} For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. {18} But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. {19} Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, {20} idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, {21} envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. {22} By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, {23} gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. {24} And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. {25} If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Anybody know what took place 50 years ago today?

On July 4th, 1960, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania the 50 star flag was flown for the first time. Hawaii, had been admitted as the 50th state on August 21, 1959.

In 1818, President Monroe had signed an executive order that fixed our flag with thirteen stripes and a star for each state in the Union. He also decreed that the new flag was to be raised for the first time on the 4th of July following the addition of a new state.

President Eisenhower was the only President who served under the short lived 49 star flag.

What a day today is -- 50 years of 50 stars.

Feels neat and complete, doesn't it?

For years, there's been talk of adding Puerto Rico as a 51st state, and the debate has raged over all kinds of political, economic and cultural issues.

But the simple truth may be that Congress is simply unwilling to add a 51st star to the flag and lose that symmetry that exists now.

Most of us are rather fascinated by numbers and numerology.

The Bible is full of all kinds of "significant" numbers. Numbers that have had some type of symbolism attached to them.

For the ancient Israelites the number One signified uniqueness and undivided wholeness.

That shouldn't be too surprising.

Remember it was Israel who introduced the world to the idea that God is one and not a pantheon.

Three is largely regarded as a divine number.

When Abraham is visited by three mysterious men by the oaks of Mamre, he comes to realize that the Lord is visiting him (Genesis 18:1-15).

Christians later affirm that God is a Trinity, one God in three persons.

According to The Oxford Companion to the Bible, the number seven signifies completeness and perfection.

In ancient Israel, the great festivals lasted seven days, and every seventh year was a Sabbath year.

Twelve is also seen as a number of completeness and perfection:

Israel had 12 tribes, and Jesus had 12 disciples.

What did the apostles do after Judas betrayed Jesus and committed suicide?

They quickly cast lots and selected Matthias to replace him (Acts 1:26).

Eleven apostles just didn't seem complete

Today we celebrate another fascinating number 50!

50 states – 50 stars – fifty years

And that, in the minds of some people also marks completeness and perfection.

But is that how life is, in these the United States of America?

234 years ago today, a document was signed in a rather insignificant building in Philadelphia. Of course, I am referring to the Declaration of Independence.

And if you have ever read that document you know that its words describe the beginning of a process and not the end of one.

It is truly a Declaration of Incompleteness.

“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.”

PURSUIT → the pursuit of happiness, that phrase alone should remind everyone who reads the Declaration knows that is this a call to a work that is never finished.

Today, on this Independence Day, 50 years since the addition of our 50th star, I think that it is not only appropriate, but also necessary for us to look at where we have been, and (more importantly?) where we are going.

234 years ago it was pretty clear that in most people’s eyes not “all men are created equal.”

Slavery was going strong

People of color were not even considered human in many people’s eyes

Fifty years ago, it still wasn’t at all clear that “all men are created equal”
segregation was enforced in many parts of our country
Black men and women were treated as second-class citizens.

It took a massive civil-rights movement to outlaw racial discrimination and move us closer to a society in which all people are accepted as equals.

But are we there yet?

Do I really need to ask that question?

Especially on a Sunday morning, the most segregated part of the week.

I think it is time for us to add a few more stars to our flag!

These stars have nothing to do with the addition of new states.
They have to do with who we are as Christians in this great land of ours.

The first star I propose that we add is **equality!**

I love how the writers of our Declaration of Independence were so theological on this point.

It says: "all men are created equal."

It doesn't say that all are born equal — it says all are *created* equal.

Creation requires a divine Creator, and as Christians we believe that:

"God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27 NRSV)

In other words → we are all created equally in God's image

Psalm 8 reminds us that we have been made:

"a little lower than God, and crowned with glory and honor." (v. 5)

So on this anniversary it is an opportunity for us to remember that ALL people have been created in God's image and blessed us with tremendous intellectual, spiritual and relational gifts.

All of us have been made a little lower than God and blessed with glory and honor.

You all who have gathered here today

Our neighbors

The working class family from Mexico

The single mom down the street

The unwanted child in need of adoption

The wealthy businessman whose marriage is falling apart and suffers
from a drinking problem

It is time to stop stereotyping each other

To stop sticking everyone into boxes and to recognize that we are all equals –
as brothers and sisters, created in the image and love of God.

Only when we recognize God in each other can we reach out with love and compassion and understanding, accepting each other just like God has accepted each of us.

So let's add a star for equality to our flag.

But let's also add a second star – a star that symbolizes to us **a life of service to God.**

The Declaration of Independence describes life as an unalienable right, but as Christians we believe that God has given us life so we can give it back to God.

There is a great story in Luke chapter 20.

A group comes to Jesus trying to trick him so that they can turn him over to the Roman authorities.

They ask Jesus:

“Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

You see they were trying to trick him.

If Jesus were to answer them by saying yes, you need to pay taxes, well, then he would get into trouble with the Jewish leaders who were vying against Rome.

However, if he were to say NO, then he would find himself in hot water with the Roman authorities.

They thought that they had him, but Jesus outwitted them!

“Show me a denarius.” Jesus said to them.

A good pious Jew would NEVER carry a Roman coin.
But they had one and showed him.

“Whose head and whose title does it bear?” asks Jesus. They say, “The emperor’s.” So Jesus says to them, “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:20-25).

On one hand, Jesus is giving a simple “separation of church and state” answer, which would certainly please Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.

Jesus is saying that we are to give to the state the things that belong to the state, including our fair share of taxes and other obligations of citizenship.

Once we’ve taken care of the state’s business, we can give to God the things that belong to God. This is an important separation, keeping the state out of the church’s business and the church out of the state’s.

But Jesus is also saying so much more!

Jesus is saying that the emperor’s money is hardly worthy of consideration. It’s as though he’s stating, “The denarius belongs to the emperor, so give it to him. It means nothing to God!”

What really matters is that we give ourselves completely to God — heart, mind and spirit.

Just as the image of the emperor is stamped on the Roman coin, the image of God should be stamped on each one of us.

When we give ourselves to God, we are giving to God the things that are God’s.

We do this whenever we use our intellectual, spiritual and relational gifts to advance God’s work in the world.

- Helping a low-income family develop a budget,
- praying for the sick and the suffering at a service of healing,
- gathering a small group for Bible study or a mission project

— all these are ways of giving our life to God.

We aren’t our own; we are the Lord’s. God has given us life so we can give it back to God.

EQUALITY
SERVICE TO GOD

The third star I want to encourage you to put on this flag is the star of **Christian Freedom**.

This Fourth of July is also the day for us to concentrate on *liberty and on the freedom we have as Christians*.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence were anxious to escape from the tyranny of the king of Great Britain, but our bondage today is to another tyrant — human selfishness or as it is traditionally called sinfulness.

In John 8, Jesus says,

“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (v. 34).

Many of us understand how sin can trap us.

- because we’ve discovered how gambling makes us want to gamble more, whether we win or lose.
- We’ve found that drinking problems tend to get worse instead of better until we discover that we’re powerless over alcohol and need professional help.
- We’ve come to see how cheating gets easier and easier until we get caught. And then we’re trapped.

But there is a way out. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples,” says Jesus, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (vv. 31-32).

We are free when we are no longer slave to our own selfishness, but instead understand that when we freely give our life to God – then – we are truly free.

Each of us needs forgiveness.

And God is willing to give us that forgiveness – if only we want it.

The fourth star I want to add is the **star of pursuing happiness in community**.

Today is the day that I want to encourage you to join me as we recommit ourselves to the pursuit of happiness – for ourselves and for all of God’s children!

As followers of Jesus, we know that happiness isn’t an isolated and individual experience.

Happiness comes from being part of a community in which God’s abundant goodness and mercy is enjoyed and shared by all.

In the first letter attributed to Peter we get this practical advice.

“As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:16-17).

Peter wants us to live as free people but warns us about using our Declaration of Independence as a permission slip to do evil.

Putting what’s good for **us** ahead of what’s good for **all** simply isn’t a Christian option.

Advancing ourselves while taking advantage of others simply doesn’t fit in this equation.

Although some of you will grumble that this sounds like socialism, it’s not. It is simply THE WAY.

Jesus reminds us over and over again that when we work for the good of all — honoring everyone, loving the Christian community, respecting earthly authorities — the entire community advances and greater happiness is shared.

Success comes when everyone can truly pursue happiness.

Four new stars to our flag.

- Equality.
- Service to God.
- Christian freedom.
- Pursuing happiness in community.

The addition of these stars will certainly create an awkward 54-star flag, which isn’t going to be anyone’s idea of a complete and perfect banner for our country.

But unless we focus on these goals, we’re going to find ourselves living in an increasingly segregated, self-serving, sin-saturated and self-centered society.

One that is more and more defined by Red and Blue than by the love of our creator.

So let's add these new stars and move a little closer to becoming a nation where all of God's children can enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Completeness and perfection will never be captured by flags but will be found only in a relationship with the One who has created us and called us to be his own.

We'll continue to declare our incompleteness until we are one with the one Lord God.

You see, this land was meant for you and me!