

INDEPENDENCE SUNDAY AT KING'S CHAPEL 2007
Sermon originally preached by James Freeman in 1796
As edited and delivered by Earl Holt
July 1, 2007

Be at peace among yourselves.
Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly,
comfort the faint hearted. - I Thessalonians 5:13b, 14

On these public festivals the ministers of the gospel are allowed to be more particular than on common occasions. Instead of confining themselves to general observations, they are permitted to consider the situation of the country in which they live, and to give their discourses a political turn. But though they have this liberty, yet they must proceed with cautious steps: for as different parties are found in all free states, by delivering their sentiments in too open a manner, they may offend some of their hearers. The following sermon, composed in the spirit of moderation, it is hoped, will not give any pain to honest citizens of either party.

The words which I have chosen for my text, express the three principal ideas which are to be the subject of this discourse. ["Be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the faint hearted."] Notwithstanding the profusion of blessings which heaven has showered down upon us, there are some men who are continually apprehending public calamity, whose hearts fail them for fear of the evils which they think are coming on their country: they are the faint hearted, and I would endeavor to comfort them. The distinguishing privileges which we enjoy cannot be perpetuated, unless we reverence the institutions of our country, obey the laws, and respect our rulers and magistrates: I would therefore warn the unruly. In fine, a spirit of party and faction, when carried to too great a length, will interrupt our tranquillity, embitter our minds against each other, and poison all the sweets of liberty: I would therefore recommend peace.

1 I. The climate which we inhabit is so salubrious, the soil which we cultivate is so productive, and the means of private and domestic happiness can so easily be obtained in this favored country, that no reasonable man has any thing to complain of on these heads. If we find any one poor, diseased, or wretched, it is not because he is an inhabitant of the United States, but because he is an inhabitant of the world; for calamity of some sort or other is inseparable from a part of mankind, even in the best situations....

The love of the land in which we live is so natural a principle, that it is not easy to find a man who is not in his heart a patriot: we all rejoice in the happiness of our fellow citizens; we all desire the prosperity of our country....The [political] sentiments of men therefore, however erroneous we may think them, afford no proof that the advocates of them are not the friends of the people. Whigs and Tories, federalists and antifederalists may be all equally good patriots. When

therefore I observe, that there are some among us who think the government under which we live too popular, and who imagine they can foresee that many evils will spring from the excess of liberty, though I believe their fears ungrounded, I mean not to censure them. That freedom, one of the most precious legacies of heaven, produces some bad effects, must be conceded. There can be no genuine liberty where all power does not originate from the people. But the people are not always virtuous. And even when they may be virtuous, the people are not always wise. In choosing legislators and magistrates they sometimes betray a want of judgment; and are influenced not by the merit of the candidate, but by circumstances of no value. Hence it is that they may continue year after year to appoint to public offices persons, who of all men in the state are the most unfit to manage them. But the greatest misfortune is, that in free countries those who court the favor of the people and guide their opinions and conduct are too often artful and corrupt. The records of history, as well as the experience of our own times, prove that popular demagogues, who gain the affections of the multitude by haranguing on the topics of patriotism and freedom, are frequently destitute of moral principle and the fear of God, are men who have no other object than to advance their own interests....For these and similar reasons some men who sincerely desire the happiness of their fellow citizens, regret that our governments are so popular. They wish that elections were less frequent, that rulers were less dependent on the suffrages of the people, and that it was less often in the power of artful men on the one hand, or ignorant men on the other, to agitate the public mind. They foresee the time, when we shall become prey of anarchy, and when in consequence of an excess of liberty, the people will be deprived of liberty itself. These apprehensions fill them with distress, and render them less sensible of the blessings which they enjoy in this free and happy country.

2 But these apprehensions appear to me unreasonable; not because it is untrue that evils do result from liberty, but because fewer evils are derived from this source than any other. Whilst a vestige of freedom remains in a country, its necessary ill effects must also remain: that is, as long as the people retain any power, they may, if they are disposed, abuse their power; and they will be still liable to be deceived by the arts of the popular leaders. But other countries not as free as our own are nevertheless also torn by factions; and they appoint to office as many improper men in proportion as are chosen here. There is no way therefore of entirely preventing the bad effects of liberty, but by annihilating liberty itself. But should we gain any thing by this? No: for history shows, that more is to be feared from the ambition, avarice, and other vices of the few, than from the follies and weakness of the many....

Free countries are commonly the most happy. They may be turbulent; and they will more loudly complain of their sufferings than despotic countries; for which reason the latter may sometimes seem to possess a greater degree of tranquillity. But this view is deceptive: for under tyrannical governments the subject is compelled to bear oppression in patience and silence; and it is one of

the evils of his situation, that he is afraid even to utter his complaints. Let us not therefore murmur against God, because we experience the few disadvantages which are inseparable from freedom; but let us rather rejoice that we are exempt from the many miseries of despotism.

As on the one hand, there are some who think our governments too popular; so on the other, there are some who are alarmed with the apprehensions that they are becoming less free. Such a fear naturally enters the minds of those who read the history of nations. In various parts of the world, and in different ages, the people have established a free government; but those whom they have invested with power have gradually made encroachments, till they have deprived them of all their rights, and depressed them to a state of vassalage. As we are not exempt from the general lot of humanity, this may possibly be our fate at some future period; and it is sometimes suspected that there is already a combination of artful and ambitious men who are secretly undermining the liberties of our country. That power naturally tends to corrupt its possessors must be admitted. These suspicions therefore may possibly be not altogether without foundation. But while I allow this, I cannot believe that we are in much danger of being enslaved. We happily live at an enlightened period, when the science of government is better understood than in any former age. We have the experience of all the nations before us; and if we are wise, we can avoid the rocks upon which the freedom of others has been shipwrecked. We have so skillfully framed our constitutions, that it is not easy for any man or body of men to gain the ascendancy. We have magistrates and rulers of various orders to watch and check each other. We have state legislatures and executive officers to arrest the encroachments of the federal government, which in return is a guard on the state governments. Add to this that the spirit of jealousy and party, which is undoubtedly an evil, but which may happily prevent still greater evils, is awake, and stands prepared to defeat every attack on the liberties of our country. The conclusion from the whole appears to me to be this, that if the citizens of the United States are not destined for permanent freedom, freedom is not then intended for the human race. We have made the fairest experiment; and if it does not succeed, we must submit to the will of heaven: but it will be folly to be cast down, because what is unavoidable ought never to be lamented.

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II. There are several other causes which render the faint hearted among us discontented; but most of them would be removed by obedience to government. I would therefore, in the second place, warn the unruly. In a country where all authority originates from the people, it is rebellion against ourselves to weaken the sanctions of the laws and to bring our rulers into contempt. Ignorant, inefficient, and corrupt magistrates and legislators should be removed from office; but while they remain, they should be treated with respect. Honor is due to the framers and administrators of the laws; but still greater reverence to the laws themselves; for they are a declaration of the public will, and are designed for the common benefit. Through inexperience, want of foresight, and other causes, they may sometimes be inconvenient, and even detrimental; but more pernicious

effects will arise from breaking them, than can possibly arise from their operation. Every good citizen therefore will set an example of obedience. He will submit to the laws which he condemns, as well as those which he approves. Should they even abridge his pleasures, oppose his prejudices, and injure his interest, as a friend of the public, he will still cheerfully comply with them.

III. One of the worst effects of liberty is sometimes supposed to be the spirit of faction which it generates. In all free states there are two parties, who entertain or pretend to entertain a very unfavorable opinion of each others designs. Such parties already exist in this country; and they seem to be gradually becoming more inveterate against each other. In some degree this mutual opposition is necessary, as it tends to keep alive the spirit of freedom,...but when carried too far, it interrupts our tranquillity, and extends the hateful spirit of discord into towns, and even into the private recesses of families. I would therefore, in the last place, recommend peace.

It would be too romantic to attempt a full reconciliation of the parties of a state; but there are some considerations which should abate their rancor. One unquestionable fact is, that both parties in the country profess themselves the friends of the public welfare; and we ought candidly to admit their pretensions. They differ in the means which they propose, but not in the end: the one may be better politicians than the other, but they are not better patriots....

The fiercest contentions take place at the season of elections. These points are undoubtedly of some moment; but a philosopher cannot forbear to smile at the eagerness and agitation which are displayed. It is the happiness of a republican form of government, that no individual is indispensably necessary to the commonwealth, whilst each individual contributes a part to the general welfare....The mind, as it cannot remain long in a state of indifference, will naturally take a side in every election; but though a victory is pleasant, yet a defeat should not be mortifying. The object is of sufficient importance to interest our feelings; but not of so much importance, as to make us ill-natured and kindle the flame of discord. After the will of the majority has been declared, provided it has been legally obtained, we should cheerfully acquiesce in it, reserving all the ardor of contest till a new trial is presented.

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Other observations might be made to show, that causes sufficient to inflame our hearts against each other do not yet exist among us. But it is time that I should conclude my discourse; which I do beseeching you, my fellow citizens to be at peace among yourselves. By your goodwill to your country, and by your regard to yourselves, I entreat you to be at peace. Be candid towards those who differ from you in political sentiments. You know that you wish well to your country: charitably believe that your opponents are equally patriotic. Continue to love your native soil, and the government by which you are protected: Promote to the utmost of your abilities the happiness of your fellow citizens....Be not unruly; but let all ranks be obedient to the laws, which are equally binding to every class of

men. Finally, be grateful to your heavenly Father for the invaluable blessings which he has bestowed on you and your country. Be not faint hearted, and afflict not yourselves with the apprehension of evils which may possibly happen. Repose all your cares in the bosom of Providence, convinced that the Lord God omnipotent reigns, that he governs the world in wisdom, and that he will infallibly bless his children and servants.

James Freeman, the first Unitarian preacher in Boston, served as the first pastor of King's Chapel following the American Revolution, from 1783 until his death in 1835