The Rev. James Richardson  
Independence Day  
July 4, 2018

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] 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.”

In the 1770s, the most important church in America – bar none – was Christ Church, Philadelphia, located across the square from what is now known as Independence Hall.

Christ Church, Philadelphia, had the tallest steeple in Colonial America, its size proclaiming the supremacy of not just God, but also of the British Empire, and not necessarily in that order.

And that made Christ Church more than just a big church; Christ Church was the symbolic focal point of British monarchy and the Church of England in Colonial America.

In colonial America, there was only one official religion: The Church of England. Other religions were tolerated in America, but the Church of England held prime place.

These two institutions – the monarchy and the Church of England – were inseparably intertwined.

Anyone who was anyone in colonial America walked through the doors of Christ Church, Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin was a regular member.

Others came as they gathered for the Continental Congress: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton among the many notables.

As it happened, the rector of Christ Church, the Rev. Jacob Duche´ was the chaplain to the Continental Congress.

On July 4, 1776, the Rev. Duche´ watched as the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Inspired and emboldened by what he witnessed that day, Duche´ proceeded to walk across the square to his church, and opened the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer. He began crossing out all references to the King of England.

Duche´ then replaced the references to the British king in the prayer book with the “United States of America.”
It can be fairly said that the American Episcopal Church – this church where you now sit – was born in this moment.

This church, our church was born in the public square – literally – in this one, brave act by the Rev. Duche´.

This was no mere editing of the prayer book. Duche’s pen struck a blow not just against a colonial power, but also against the idea that government could dictate to its people the religion they were to follow.

In this new nation, there would be no established church, no official state religion. Monarchs and governments would not be in charge of the peoples’ souls – or their conscience.

We might now take this for granted, but the world had never seen the concept that people could decide for themselves what religion they would follow – or whether to follow any religion at all.

In the United States of America, all religions would have the same opportunity to win the hearts and minds of people, and the people would be guided by the dictates of their own conscience.

This church, the Episcopal Church, was founded on this principle. Yet freedom of conscience means nothing if people have no conscience. And having a conscience means nothing if people do not act on their conscience.

And that leads us to a realm that makes many good, faithful people squirm – politics – and with good reason.

Many well-meaning, and not-so-well-meaning people, have weaponized the Bible to justify their pre-conceived political ideas. This is nothing new.

Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, observed this fact in the depths of the Civil War: “Both [sides] read the same Bible,” he said, “and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other.”

Neither side, President Lincoln said, could be fully right.

But that does not mean the Bible has nothing to teach us.

The Bible, in fact, is unavoidably a political document. The Bible tells the stories of liberation from slavery and rebellions against unjust rulers. It tells the stories of judges and kings, their triumphs and failures, their talents and their flaws.

The psalms are filled with blessings for rulers who care especially for the poor, and curses for rulers who exploit and harm their people.

The Bible details laws – many laws – with the aim that people will live peaceably and fairly with each other.

One of my rabbi friends, Mona Alfi of Congregation B’nai Israel here in Sacramento, points out that the Bible requires that the Jewish people must
live in a society that is governed by law, and that law must value both justice and mercy.

We share this requirement as a people of the Biblical faith.

The Hebrew words for God evoke these concepts – Adonai means the “Lord of mercy” and Elohim means the “Lord of justice.”

The God we worship is the One God who is both the Lord of mercy and the Lord of justice.

We hear today from the Book of Deuteronomy – the law book of the Hebrew Scriptures – and these words are well chosen for Independence Day to illustrate this point.

These ancient sacred words speak of justice and mercy for all people, reminding us that we, too, were once strangers in a strange land.

These ancient sacred words remind us that we must treat those who come from other lands with justice and mercy because we, too, are in need of justice and mercy.

There will be times when the Biblical faith compels us to take a public stand for justice and mercy, and not only as individuals, but also as a church.

This has always been so since the day that the Rev. Jacob Duche´ crossed out the name of the king in his church’s prayer book.

This is why we are taking a stand as a church against the separation of migrant children from their parents, and why we take a stand on many other issues.

Yet we must always be careful as a church to avoid rancor, cynacism and partisanship. Our tone matters as much as the content of our words.

And tone matters not just here in the pulpit, but with each other. It matters how we talk to each other – and how we listen to each other – especially about issues that we feel passionate about, and issues that divide us.

Our greatest contribution to the public square might well be to model how to respectfully articulate the moral and ethical values we hold dear as faithful people while holding space for our differences.

At our best, this is who we are as a people of the biblical faith.

We not only respect that we have multiple viewpoints, we cherish it – because it is only in the fullness of our perspectives that can we possibly discern the mind of Christ for how we should act in the world.

How perfectly fitting it is that the Book of Common Prayer was the means by which Jacob Duche´ struck a blow for freedom on that July day long ago.

Think about this for a moment: Our declaration of independence as a church is the prayer book sitting in front of you in the pews.
We are shaped to depths of souls and called to action by our common prayer.

The deepest kind of prayer is not when we tell God what to do, but the kind of prayer when we listen for God’s call to us.

The question isn’t what will God do? The question is, what would God have us do?

That might mean prayer could come with risk. That is precisely what Jesus drives at in the gospel lesson this morning: prayer that is so open and so risky that we even pray for justice and mercy even for our enemies.

Our prayer may bring us to places we’d rather not go. Jacob Duche´ took a risk and he paid a dear price for his actions. He was arrested by the British, imprisoned and exiled.

Our church was born in the public square, and it is in the public square where our church still lives.

Indeed, our branch of the “Jesus Movement” as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls us, has never stood apart from society.

We take risks because we see our discipleship of Jesus as engaged in the world and all of its muck and messiness because that is truly where Jesus dwells.

Through the last two centuries, our Episcopal Church has witnessed to justice and mercy in the convulsions of civil war, economic depressions, and world wars.

Our church has fought for civil rights, women’s rights, gay and lesbian rights, immigrant rights, racial reconciliation, environmental healing, and much, much more.

As a church, we sometimes get it wrong, and we are sometimes slow out of the gate. Sometimes we stumble. But we get up and try again.

At our best, our actions as a church are grounded in Scripture, forged in our common prayer, and always embracing a deep respect for the conscience of individuals.

On this Independence Day may we pray without ceasing for our nation; may we pray without ceasing for friends, and our enemies, and may we pray without ceasing for all the peoples of this good Earth, our island home.

And then let us act as God gives us the strength to act.

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