

“FLAG OR FONT?”

John 8:31-38 July 1st, 2018

In an old Reader's Digest issue an article listed “50 Surprising Reasons we love America.” I can't and won't go through all of them but I did want to share several with you. Here we go:

#28, **We tell cold weather to take a hike.** The Popsicle 5K in Davie County, North Carolina, an annual fund-raiser for local youth projects, lives up to its chilly name. The race is held in February, and festivities include an ice pop-eating contest called the Brain Freeze Challenge.

#30, **In Kansas, a Dorothy can fly a rainbow-colored parachute.** The last wish of hospice patient Dorothy Ellis, 92, was to soar above the fields of her hometown, Iola, Kansas, in a powered parachute. Six weeks before her death, Ellis's family hired a pilot to grant her wish. Video of the flight, which shows her laughing, clapping, and giving a thumbs-up, was set to the song “Over the Rainbow.”

#33, **Even our obituary pages are entertaining.** From the *Asbury Park Press*: William “Willie” Joseph Patton (aka Mad Dog), 69, passed away on Sunday, April 29, 2012, having lived more than twice as long as his elementary school teachers had predicted. Willie...will be remembered for his wonderful and sometimes demented sense of humor, quick wit, lifelong friendships, and magnificent ability to tan and maintain that tan through the gloomiest winter months.

#36 **Some comedians still work clean.** “I was the best man at the wedding. If I'm the best man, why is she marrying him?” Jerry Seinfeld

#38 **Nothing keeps our voters down.** An elderly Michigan man was determined to cast his ballot in the 2012 presidential election. After collapsing at his polling site, losing his pulse for a spell, and being revived by a nurse, he asked, “Did I vote?”

#39 **Our inventors extend a hand across the ocean to a little boy.** Ivan Owen, of Bellingham, Washington, collaborated online with South African Richard Van As to create a prosthetic hand for a boy born without fingers. The inventors then posted the plans on the internet for anyone to use for free.

“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” (The Book of Common Prayer)

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands...” (The Pledge of Allegiance)

If you were surprised by the presentations of the colors this morning, I am as well.

If you were surprised by our saying The Pledge of Allegiance in church this morning, I am as well. I don't recall a time when I did that unless it was in conjunction with a Boy Scout program at some point. But today we celebrate Independence Sunday with the Fourth of July coming on Wednesday this year. This is our festival of Freedom.

There are two more quotations I would like for you to consider. One is from Thomas Jefferson: “For we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” ...And then from Jesus, “If you continue in my word, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Political freedom. Religious freedom. On this Independence Sunday and on the Fourth of July we celebrate our festival of freedom.

The date was June 7th, 1776. A group of thirteen men were gathered together in a small room and they were debating. They represented the thirteen different colonies, and there was no unanimity among them. The debate was hot and furious, and finally there was a motion by Richard Henry Lee that said: “I move that all thirteen colonies be free, independent states.” The resolution was seconded by John Adams. The debate continued; it was intense; and the vote finally passed with the overwhelming majority...of seven to six. It was a slim vote. It was *not* a unanimous decision by any means.

A subcommittee was then formed, headed by Thomas Jefferson, who was to write the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was put before Congress on July 2nd, 1776, and it was ratified immediately by twelve of the states. But you need thirteen, thirteen out of thirteen. It had to be unanimous for it to pass. One state was holding out: New York; and New York held out for two more days. On July 4th, 1776, it was finally *unanimously* ratified. And we *then* heard these great words which became etched into American history and into your personal history and mine: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...that all men are created equal...and that they are endowed by their Creator...with certain inalienable rights...and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

These words have been etched into your heart and mine, into your history and mine.

The Declaration of Independence continued: “Appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions...we declare that these united Colonies have a right to be free and independent states.” In other words, the authors appealed to the Supreme Judge of the world as the authority that gave them the right to pursue political independence. In the word, The Supreme Judge of the world, you feel the religious undertones of the Declaration.

The *last words* of Declaration of Independence are also memorable: “With firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” And they did. All fifty-six people who signed the Declaration gave their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.

Throughout the years, we have read many articles about the lives of these fifty-six human beings, and you cannot help but admire their integrity and courage. One of them said, “Either we will hang separately or we will hang together.” Of the fifty-six people who signed the document that day, more than half of them suffered deeply because of their commitment to independence. Two were killed immediately in battle; five were soon captured and tortured by the British; twelve had their homes burned; nine others died of hardship related to the war. ... Francis Lewis of New York, who originally refused to sign the document, lost his home and his property and went into hiding. The British could not find him, but they found his wife, and she died shortly thereafter in jail. Yes, he paid the price for freedom with the death of his wife...And then there was John Hart, from New Jersey, who hid in the woods as the British were attacking his home; and he hid nearby in a cave *for a year*, escaping his enemies. When he finally came out, he discovered his wife had died, and so, at the age of seventy, he went and joined the army to fight for freedom...at the age of 70. Yes, it is true; these people not only *pledged* their lives, fortunes and honor; they gave their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. The original fifty-six signatories set the pattern that men and women will sacrifice all for political freedom.

We are not only impressed with their integrity and sacrifice, we are also impressed by their deep commitment to God, to religion, to Jesus Christ, and the ideals of Christianity. Their ideals, their Christian ideals, and the ideals of the

French Enlightenment inspired democracy. All of these people were deeply religious men. Democracy was born in the hearts and minds of religious people.

For example, John Adams, who became the second President of the United States, wrote the following words to his wife, Abigail, on July 2nd, 1776: “The second of July, 1776, will be the most memorial epic in the history of America. I am led to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations on every anniversary festival. It ought to be a commemoration as a day of deliverance with solemn acts of devotion to God.” With what? Commemorated how? With solemn acts of devotion to God. With fireworks displays? Parades down the main streets? Family barbecues. Yes, all of these things help us remember July 4th. But more important than these, according to John Adams, were solemn acts of devotion to Almighty God. In other words, John Adams was a deeply religious man, and he commemorated July 4th with prayers of solemn thanksgiving to the Almighty.

It was not only John Adams who was devoutly religious. So was Thomas Jefferson who embodied the very Spirit of our Declaration of Independence. Jefferson wrote: “We are endowed *by our Creator* with certain inalienable rights...*by our Creator*, with a capital letter C. Jefferson said that the source of these now famous inalienable rights was...God, who was the Supreme Judge of the world, the Divine Providence on whom we are to rely on for protection...George Washington was also a man of deep faith. We know the stories about his religiously inspired courage at Valley Forge...And who was that member of our first Congress who wrote into our Declaration of Independence, that every session of Congress was to begin with prayer? Who insisted that each and every session of Congress was to begin with prayer? It was none other than Benjamin Franklin himself, the greatest agnostic of the group. And William Penn from Pennsylvania said that if “We are not ruled by God we will be ruled by tyrants.” What I am suggesting to you is that at the *very core* of democracy, at the *very source* of democracy, at the *very beginning* of democracy were deeply religious human beings.

Democracy works most effectively when there is a bedrock of religious idealism beneath it. And if you want to have democracy continue to function in America today, it will not last long unless our democracy is wedded to the spiritual power of religious fidelity and deep faith in God. As God’s Word says, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord’s.” (Psalm 33:12)

You personally know the words of the Declaration of Independence. These words are like John 3:16. You fill in the blanks and complete the following sentences. “We hold these truths to bethat all men are.....and that they have been endowed by theirwith certain And among these are,, You know these words: they have been etched into your soul. They have been etched into the soul of this nation. They are like John 3:16. They are democracy in a nutshell.”

When we enter into the worship of the triune God, we give witness to the truth that we are citizens of a commonwealth wider than that of the nation of our birth. We are, as members of the body of Christ across time and space, Christians without borders. We pledge allegiance to the country we love and to the sovereign God of the universe made known to us in a first-century Jewish revolutionary. Baptism (the Christian’s *Dependence Day* since we acknowledge and celebrate our reliance on others) grants a new identity that transcends all other identity markers. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted, “Those baptized no longer belong to the world, no longer serve the world, and are no longer subject to it. They belong to Christ alone, and relate to the world only through Christ.”

Our God calls us to a life lived after the pattern of Jesus, and through baptism our lives are united with his and are offered back to us as gifts so that we might become conduits of the love, mercy, and justice that is the Trinitarian life of God. *This is the freedom we seek to enjoy—on the 4th of July and every day of our lives.* Amen? Amen.