

**Sermon for Morning Prayer  
Independence Day (July 4)**

**Lessons:**<sup>1</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>2</sup>

“In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD JEHOVAH is everlasting strength:

“ ... The way of the just is uprightness: thou, most upright, dost weigh the path of the just. Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O LORD, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee.

...

“LORD, thou wilt ordain peace for us: for thou also hast wrought all our works in us.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the thirty-first Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.<sup>3</sup>

“... Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

“They answered him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but

the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “[A]nd you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”<sup>4</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

**Introduction, Theme, and Development:**

It is commonplace today for commencement speakers, preachers, politicians, and others who are called on to pontificate to the public to tell us that society and the world are currently engaged in a great struggle for the soul of humanity. After listening to the contents of some of these comments, and examining what they have to say, I sometimes think that their image of a great struggle owes less to the speakers’ powers of insight and analysis and more to the example of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

That is generally acknowledged to be one of the greatest examples, if not the greatest example, of public discourse in the English language. And who can forget its resounding second sentence, “Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure”?

Among today’s more thoughtful users of this paradigm of conflict, we are sometimes told that the great struggle of our times is that between the individual, as a sovereign political and economic actor, and collective entities that seek to control and restrict that individual, such as governments. In its most simplistic form, this definition of the conflict is summarized as one of democracy against despotism, of capitalism against central planning.

I do not contest that the rights and liberties of the individual are, indeed, often threatened by political operatives who are convinced they know better than taxpayers and voters how those taxpayers and voters ought to behave and to live. Only last week, the U.S. Supreme Court decided the first in what will undoubtedly be a long and horrendously expensive series of lawsuits brought to force notoriously corrupt and incompetent city governments – in that case Chicago’s – to cease and desist from interfering in their citizens’ efforts to defend themselves against home invasions, muggings, robberies, and other violent crimes.

However, on this anniversary of our nation’s independence, I would like to suggest to you that there is another, and more fundamental, struggle that underlies the more obvious political, economic, and social debates of our time. This is the struggle over the correct answer to the questions, “Is there such a thing as Truth? And if there is, how do we find and identify that which is True?”

This is the fundamental issue in the academic discipline known as *epistemology* [**ee-PISS-tem-oll-ogee**], which is the subfield of philosophy that studies what it means to say that something is “true”. A moment’s reflection will show that *every* field of human endeavor, from the physical sciences to the humanities, can exist and operate in an organized, rational fashion only after it has answered this question for itself.

For about seven years, I taught Philosophy to undergraduates, a somewhat surprising undertaking for someone who does not have a degree in that subject. Perhaps it was my non-standard background that made me so conscious of my students’ reactions as they began to study Ethics, the subject I was teaching them. None of them were Philosophy majors, because that university did not offer a major in the subject, nor, in fact, were any of them even taking Philoso-

phy as a minor. Each of my students was taking the only Philosophy course he or she ever would take and was taking it only because Ethics was required for his or her degree program. Usually, although not exclusively, that degree program was in Business.

I have to assume that whoever it was in the Business and Nursing Departments who had set this requirement had never himself or herself taken a course in Ethics. This is because “Ethics”, properly understood, is the study of the *abstract* principles of good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and vice. The study of how to bring those principles to bear on solving *concrete* problems of behaviour is a separate study called “Moral Philosophy” or just “Morals”, which was neither required in those programs nor, even, taught in that university.

Since we are sitting here in church, I will also point out that there is a similar distinction in Philosophy’s sister faculty, Theology, where we find the abstract discipline of Theological Ethics and the practical one of Moral Theology. Whenever you, as church people, go into the confessional or seek counsel from your priest, you dipping into that field of Moral Theology.

So, anyhow, semester after semester, I had from twenty to sixty not very eager students, pragmatic rather than abstract in their basic orientation, immersed in quasi-mathematical disciplines such as accounting and quantitative methods or in physical sciences such as chemistry, biology, and anatomy. All were well-trained in learning *what* do in a variety of situations but virtually none of whom had ever before given any comprehensive, organized thought to the *meaning* of what it was they were to do.

Interestingly, the most intellectually curious student I can recall was a hairdresser who was working her way through college; I sometimes wonder if it was not the ab-

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<sup>3</sup> St. John 8: 31-36 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> St. John 8: 32 (RSV).

<sup>5</sup> THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, first sentence.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, second sentence.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 96: 13b (RSV).

<sup>8</sup> St. John 1: 14a (RSV).

<sup>9</sup> St. John 14: 17a (RSV).

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similar one that seeks to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan under its obscurantist sway.

Certainly the men and women who founded this Republic, the birth of which we celebrate today, did not believe that “Truth” is a changeable commodity. Thus they opened their “Declaration of Independence” with two key sentences. The first contains an affirmation that God is the source of all authoritative Truth, and appeals to “the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God...”<sup>5</sup> And the second confirms the drafters’ understanding of the absolute nature of Truth when it declares, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...”<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Founding Fathers of our nation recognized that the “Truth” which, if we know it, will make us free, and in which we can repose our trust to protect our liberty, has two unalterable characteristics. It proceeds ultimately from God and, therefore, it is unalterable. What was true before is true now and will remain true hereafter. They were, to a man, steeped in the words of the Scriptures that say of the First Person of the Trinity, “He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth”,<sup>7</sup> that refer to the Second Person of that Trinity as “full of grace and truth”,<sup>8</sup> and that identify the Third Person of that Trinity as “the Spirit of truth”.<sup>9</sup>

This is the Truth that, if we will but know it, will make us free.

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, J.D.<sup>10</sup>  
July 4, 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 26: 1-4, 7-8, 12 (KJV).

sence of quantitative material in the cosmetology curriculum that had left her native intelligence undamaged

And while it is not the main point I wish to make to you today, it is worth pausing to note that problem of the way the hyper-technical orientation of our system of higher training – I hesitate to call its present manifestations “higher education” – and its effect in smothering the ability of its graduates to think rigorously about the meaning of what they have been trained to do.

Many years ago, a famous nutritionist from the Harvard Medical School, Professor Jean Mayer, a much-decorated soldier in the Second World War, with doctorates from Yale and from the Sorbonne, and a founder of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, became President of Tufts University. He thereby took charge of an institution unique in that it possessed four well-regarded graduate schools, each of which has cognates in other universities but all of which are seldom associated in one institution. These are a medical school, a dental school, an engineering school, and the famous Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy that is one of the feeder institutions for our U.S. Foreign Service.

One of Dr. Mayer’s first actions, based upon his broad international experience as well as his observations over 26 years teaching at the Harvard Medical School, was to lay down a new curriculum in the humanities that he required of all students in the Tufts Medical and Dental Schools. At the time, he stated that no person should graduate from those programs at Tufts without the tools to reflect on the true importance of the vital work he or she would be doing.

In the spirit of Dr. Mayer’s curriculum reform, let me now return to the perhaps five to six hundred unwilling technologists to whom I was assigned to teach Ethics. Almost

without exception, every one of this intellectually virgin population entered the classroom as a committed moral relativist. By “moral relativism” I mean the notion that “whatever they do there, that is all right for them”. Put less colloquially, this concept holds that the term “right” is merely code for “whatever is actually done in a certain time, place, or culture” and the term “wrong” is merely code for “whatever is not done in a certain time, place, or culture”.

Raised under a permanent downpour of “tolerance” and “respect for diversity”, the American undergraduates I encountered were, as I say, relativists almost to a man or a woman. They had been completely brainwashed to believe that it was “disrespectful” to question the *mores* [More-ays] of other societies or cultures. This, it may quickly be seen, leaves no room for any concept of “truth” as an absolute value; in fact, relativism renders “truth” essentially meaningless, which is why it was such a popular concept with the anthropologically-influenced social reformers of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century such as Margaret Sanger and Margaret Mead.

Curiously, the only ones who were not knee-jerk relativists were the tiny minority who entered the classroom with strong Christian principles that had remained intact despite the best efforts of the higher education system.

My course consisted, in large part, of asking these relativist students to examine the assumptions that underlay the position they, like obedient intellectual “drug mules”, had carried in with them. The first such disturbing questions always went like this:

“You say ‘Whatever they do there, that is all right for them.’ So, just who is it that is the ‘they’ who is doing whatever it is? And where is the ‘there’ where this is going on?”

Then they would be asked to read an historical account of one practice in Medieval Japan – and, they were reminded, Medieval Japan survived until 1870. This was the freedom accorded to any Samurai warrior to try out the edge of his sword by cutting in half any peasant he met passing on the highway. So, the students were asked, “Who is the ‘they’ who is cutting peasants in half? Isn’t it only Samurai?”

Then they would be asked who in that society agreed with and approved of the sword-testing policy, the small minority of Samurai who benefited from it or the much larger number of peasants who suffered from it. Of course, the answer was undoubtedly that all Samurai agreed and no peasants supported it. That, it was pointed out, went right along with the fact that in that culture, only Samurai were permitted to own weapons and any peasant who was found in possession of one would be put to death. So in the end, the “they” who “did that” in Medieval Japan were the armed, powerful, but minority elite and the “they” to whom it “was done” were the unarmed, powerless, but majority lower class.

This example of socially-sanctioned murder is just one of many situations that easily demonstrate the impracticality of the relativist position. Unless there are firm, unvarying principles of right and wrong, any society is constantly at risk for slipping into officially-sanctioned injustice, swayed by the preferences of the majority – or at least of the party in power – of the moment.

One needs only to look at the news media to see this happening around us even as we speak today, in the Tiananmen Square murderers who hold mainland China in their iron fist, in the quasi-religious malignant dwarf ideologue who catastrophically mismanages North Korea, in the pathological blood-soaked theocracy that rules Iran, or in the very