

Declarations and Revolutions¹

Lessons: Psalm 30; Matthew 25:31-46; AC, 149

Yesterday, July 4, our nation celebrated the traditional date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This day in 1776 for America, much like our Church's 19th of June 1770,² is usually commemorated with great crowds and fanfare as a birthday of something important.

Declaration and (premature) celebration of an ideal

What is it that we celebrate on the Fourth of July? When we get down to it, it's not much different from what we celebrate on the 19th of June – The declaration of a new standard representing a revolution in thought and allegiance.

In both instances, however, we celebrate something that does not exist, but instead is an ideal that is ever coming into being. The Declaration of Independence includes these words embedded in our national consciousness: “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. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”³ These truths, however, were not made evident to the millions of Black people held in the bondage of Slavery. These rights were tucked away from the nation's women who had limited access to property, education, independence, and their franchise. This consent was made foreign to those indigenous peoples who became alienated from the very land that once was theirs.

These values captured in our Declaration of Independence were held as the new standard of this new nation. And people have striven to secure them more perfectly ever since.

This past month in the United States has been filled with unrest, awakenings, and conversations on inequalities experienced throughout the land. Cities have turned into demonstration platforms while governments have been in the precarious position of having to balance in both hands the protection of rights of peaceful protest and the protection of property. Curfews have been instituted to help bring calm to the streets and to separate principled protesters from those who are merely makers of mischief and far worse. There has been varied response to their efforts, and it is clear that protesters and activists will not be silenced. They are emboldened even now by the values of the Declaration and they are protected by the Constitution of our nation.

The proprium as a good thing

This great extended unrest might seem to some like a failing of the Democratic principles of our nation. However, the Doctrines for the New Church tell us that a collective group, such as a

¹ The Rev. Christopher Augustus Barber, M. Div., M. Ed.
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² TCR 791

³ Declaration of Independence: A Transcript, 2020

nation, is a macrocosm of an individual.⁴ Each individual has something within them that the Doctrines call a proprium—this is the source of our experience of selfhood which is initially rooted in the love of self and of the world.⁵ It is what makes it so that we have a sense that I have an ending of who I am and you have a beginning of who you are.⁶ That there is such a thing as mine and the eventual recognition that there can and ought to be such a thing as yours. This is what makes it possible for us to have individual as well as communal identities and plans, hopes and dreams.

For those who know about this proprium, or this perception of selfhood, it often has a bad connotation, as the Doctrines frequently present it as pure love of the self and pure love of the world and the source of all evil.⁷ This is due to warnings against leaving our propria untrained and immature. However the Doctrines also tell us that if we refuse to engage in the love of self and world, if we try to live only in the spirit and neglect what is natural about our lives and our world, then we become like a house that has lost its foundation, one that would crack and crumble.⁸ From this pulpit last week Rev. Glenn spoke on this necessity of life.

And this proprium, this self, is what also makes it so that we can detect when we are being harmed, being limited, being taken advantage of, and being controlled, and being oppressed.⁹ It is the part of us that makes us respond with upset and indignation, sometimes with anger and rage or protest when we or “our people” are threatened.¹⁰ It is what makes it so that we can keep our balance as individuals in a society of many – eventually conserve harmony between the push and pull of life, and keep track of our rights and responsibilities.¹¹

When people are together as a collective unit, whether it is in the collective identity as a married couple, as a family, as a city, as a nation, or as a church – the proprium is the source of our ability to have pride, and our ability to be a community and to take care of our own. It is the source of a community’s ability to inventory needs and respond to trials and hurts. Like how a town rallies together to stop the advance of a highway that will divide their community, or how a nation can rise up in time of war and support each other in the effort.

The proprium as a bad thing

And yet this same proprium that makes for such ordinary and extraordinary demonstrations of sacrifice and camaraderie for oneself and one’s people has another side to it. It can make us as individuals indifferent to the suffering of those who are not “our own.” It makes it possible for us to put our interests, both individually and collectively, above the needs or even the rights of others. It is what can lead to communities looking down their collective nose at others. It can make for nations to take advantage of other weaker sovereignties. It can lead churches and faith

⁴ *cf.* NJHD 91; DLW 319; TCR 775; *et al.*

⁵ BE 110, *et al.*

⁶ DP 78, *et al.*

⁷ *cf.* NJHD 82, *et al.*

⁸ HH 528

⁹ *cf.* AC 847

¹⁰ CL 392

¹¹ *cf.* AC 1594

groups to believe that they are exclusively the people of God, and everyone else quite literally be damned. It can make individuals and collectives believe that their way of life is the best way, or their culture the best culture, or their perspective the best perspective, or their political party the best party, or their heritage the best heritage, or even their race the best race.¹²

Much like freedom is a double-edged sword, the proprium, that sense of self, can be the same. That mechanism which can bring us together as we focus on our collective needs and protection can also drive us apart. What determines whether community or ostracization will occur is what is most important to us, in other words, what rules us.¹³

Rebellion in America

And speaking of rulers... The great irony of Independence Day is that we celebrate the deliberate dissolution of our ties with one ruling government in favor of the ultimate establishment of a new one. Our independence was accomplished by significant acts of lawlessness and rebellion. From the perspective of today, most Americans would agree that this was the right call. However, the internal deliberation and strife within the Second Continental congress, as well as within regular everyday colonials leading up to the Revolution was very real. The tension is captured in the newspapers and journals of the day. It is captured in memories of family divide – fathers against sons and in-laws against their children’s chosen spouses. The tension in the colonies was real, the hurt harbored in that reality was real. From this, a flashpoint in history—the Boston Massacre—exploded out of the hidden energy of that tension. Despite its name, only five men were killed – the first to fall being a dock worker, Crispus Attucks, a man of Native American and African descent. Word of the event was spread around the nation and stirred people, eventually leading future President John Adams, who had been in Boston during the event, to reflect that on that day the “foundation of American Independence was laid.”¹⁴

Many events and offenses led to the Declaration of Independence which we celebrated yesterday, of which the Boston Massacre is just one example. Small skirmishes here and there became all-out war – complete and total revolution. The British Colonies of North America no longer wishing to be subservient to England, outlined their grievances and made polite dignified supplication to their king to honor their wish to separate and exist alongside them, “to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them.”¹⁵

With this document, the Second Continental Congress channeled the American. And when King George refused to acknowledge their sovereignty, the nation stood firm in their demand for autonomy, respect, and equal footing on the world stage, and threw themselves on, as they put it,

¹² *cf.* NJHD 75; AC 3993.9; Jonah 4; and PP 211, 214

¹³ *cf.* AC 8794; DP 113

¹⁴ Andrews, 2018

¹⁵ Declaration of Independence: A Transcript, 2020

“the protection of divine Providence,”¹⁶ and risked their “lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor”¹⁷ and officially were in open revolution.

The American revolutionaries demanded a change. And they demanded a change because above all they had something that we all are called to have. Something that serves as an extension of the proprium: Self-respect. And what is self-respect but a willingness to believe in our own potential—that we are born for good things.¹⁸ What is self-respect but our willingness to love who we are and to believe that we are worthy. The Lord calls us each to have this. He calls out to us in His Word, begging us to hear that He loves us. He calls out to us in His Word asking us to take care of ourselves, body, mind, and soul.¹⁹

Rebellion in ourselves

And... Much like the proprium has two sides, self-respect can go too far. When it tips the balance and becomes a disrespect of others, it goes too far. When it causes us to dismiss others it goes too far. When it turns into a contempt and disgust of others who are different it goes too far.²⁰

And when things go too far, we require a revolution.

The Doctrines for the New Church tell us that our sense of self must in time be put away in favor of something better. Our selfhood is limited, our proprium natural, and without change will always treat ourselves as being the gold standard of humanity. But if you’re like me, you know that you’re not perfect. But there is one who is perfect. We must take on the Lord’s standard and learn to see the world through His eyes and from His sense of self. He calls us to take on His ways which are higher than ours. He asks us to have a revolution of our own hearts and minds—each of us individually and collectively.

The Doctrines for the New Church, penned not long before the Declaration we celebrated yesterday, spell out terms of their own which are radical and revolutionary in and of themselves. They tell of a sundering and a separation – the end of an old Christian church, one corrupted and overbearing, one disconnected from the values and understanding of the Divine. One that had shattered God in three and made charity of no importance. The Doctrines of the New Church tell a story of a new and independent spirit – one, not of a New Nation, but of a New Christianity. Their spirit, rebellious and radical, tells of a new way of being people. They tell of a new heart that we each can have, one where our selfishness and worldliness take a back-seat to our care for our neighbors and our love to the Lord.

These documents of church and country have much in common. They both tell a story of high expectations for future independence. For separation from what has become harmful and a hindrance. For dreams of freedom – true freedom and responsibility. And – neither of them is a

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ HH 329, *et al.*

¹⁹ DLW 331

²⁰ *cf.* AC 2910

guarantee. In a way, the Doctrines of the New Church spreading throughout the world is not much different from a copy of the Declaration of Independence packed away on a ship bound for London. They are both imbued with bold, audacious, and at the time of their advent, radically revolutionary dreams, and neither of them secures for anyone their vision.

Must we have the full roadmap established to be confident in a vision? From declaration to realization? From Doctrine to New Jerusalem Descended? No. How can we? But we must set our course by some guiding light. The Northern star of our values and hopes. The rising sun of our better tomorrow.

And we must do this despite being inclined to evils of every kind. As our Executive Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr. reminded in his letter to the church in response to the racial unrest following the murder of George Floyd:

“We [...] have available to us vital perspectives from the Heavenly Doctrines—that variety is a part of perfection, and that each soul is an angel in the making loved by the Lord. A particular teaching has demanded attention in my mind at this time. It states that “evils cannot be removed unless they appear” (Divine Providence 278). The thing that led me to this passage is the rejecting part—the Lord doesn’t cause evil to happen but can work with us to abhor it when we see its destructive nature. We are seeing that rejection [in our nation today], and that is as it should be.”

Part of the work of setting our sights on a better future is contending with the obstacles, challenges, threats, and enemies that stand between us and that better future. This is true for our great nation when we set our sights on the lofty promises and goals of the Declaration of Independence. When we enact the rights and privileges and responsibilities set forth by us and for us—and by us—in our Constitution, the very document which gives us the right to assemble, to worship, and to believe as we would today.

Comparing and Contrasting America and ourselves

In the United States we value the consent of the governed. These days we hear the voices of our friends and neighbors, the voices hundreds the voices of thousands the voices of tens and hundreds of thousands—the voices of generations crying out in the streets! We hear them calling for Justice! They state that they do not consent to being treated as second or third-class citizens but rather equal members of the body of this nation. They demand that their brothers and sisters be treated the same. They declare their independence from old harmful systems, and work to incite revolution of hearts, minds, and ways.

In a community, just as in a body, if one part suffers, every part suffers with it.²¹ We are called in this church to be mindful of the whole body of our church. We are charged by our constitution and the very spirit of it to be mindful of the whole body of our nation. We are charged with the selfless love of the father in Heaven who calls us to love one another as He has loved us.²² And if Jesus – God himself on the cross could call for forgiveness of those who rejected Him. Of those

²¹ 1 Cor. 12:26

²² John 13:34

who persecuted Him. Of he who Betrayed Him. Of those who arrested Him, mocked and scourged Him, humiliated and tortured Him. Of those who set themselves as His enemies. Of those who crucified Him... if God— the one with every reason to condemn— could find it in His heart to forgive, who are we to hate our sisters and brothers in this national body.

His declarations were *radical*. Jesus called for a revolution of heart.

I think of His parable which I read this morning of the *Son of Man Judging the Nations*—

We must see ourselves in this parable, as individuals, as a church, and as a country. There have been times when we have been righteous. There have been times when we have been accursed. There have been times when we have been loving and there have been times when we have left the sick uncared for and the imprisoned unvisited.

But inasmuch as we have done it to the least – we have done it to the highest. So what does that mean for when we've left it undone... ?

Whether we are speaking of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Ten Commandments, The Beatitudes, or the Doctrines for the New Church, these are all tall orders. But they are all tall orders for our souls and our spirits. They are tall orders for salvation of all people and the creation of a heaven from the human race. They are tall orders for our hearts, and if we are to fulfill them, we must ever strive to do better.

It is not enough to make a Declaration. It is not enough to craft a Constitution. It is not enough to know a doctrine. It is not enough to hold a Bible. These are simply the beginning.

The proprium as a tool in the revolution

Our proprium is in us as a tool to aid us in our journey through this life. We must have access to love of the self and love of the world - the pride and the self-confidence and the self-love and the self-worth and self-respect to look at our past and see how far we've come. To be proud of our accomplishments. To be proud of our growth. But at the same time, we must have the humility to look forward and see how far we have to go. To see how we all fall short of the Glory of God²³ and even so we are called into all greatness in Him who made us and governs us and guides us and seeks our acceptance of His will and His way.

He tells us that things will be hard when we pursue what is right.²⁴ That families will turn on each other on account of commitments to what is right.²⁵ He tells us that sufficient for EACH AND EVERY DAY is the evil thereof.²⁶ He tells us that there are many opportunities for destruction as we go.²⁷ –And He tells us to set our sights on the sunrise of a better tomorrow.²⁸

²³ Rom. 3:23

²⁴ Matt. 5:11, 10:22

²⁵ Luke 12:49-53

²⁶ Matt. 6:34

²⁷ Matt. 7:13-14

²⁸ HH 141-142, *et al.*

Our nation has been in a state of unrest and weeping. But there is joy promised in the morning.²⁹ We must each in our own way find it in ourselves to feel the grief of our brothers and sisters – the heartache of a nation, not hold them in murderous contempt. Social media is almost like a training ground for this work. It has given us an unprecedented opportunity to hear from each other and to see both great displays of dismissiveness, contempt, and hatred, at the same time as it exhibits compassion, growth, knowledge, and love. Protests and counter protests and demonstrations and letters and videos and books and articles and conversations and sermons happen. There is conflict in these to be sure, but as the proverb says, “iron sharpens iron...”³⁰

We find ourselves right now fighting in the battleground of ideas and values. But at some point, we must beat these iron swords of revolution into ploughshares for farming and turn from deconstruction of old harmful systems to the development and growth of new and better ones.³¹ And we can do this in the spirit of the Lord if we are willing to find unity in the human points of contact in our topics of passion.

We must as a nation, as a church, and as individuals make our declarations, and see to our revolutions.

Amen.

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²⁹ Ps. 30:5

³⁰ Prov. 27:17

³¹ Is. 2:4