

Each Independence Day, historians retell - with little variation - how the “*subjects*” of King George became “*citizens*” of the United States of America. But a few years ago, an article shared how scientists had recently used a new computer process to reexamine the first draft of the Declaration of Independence. And in that examination they found that in the section where Jefferson listed the grievances the Continental Congress had against the king, he had originally written “*my fellow subjects.*” But while the ink apparently was still wet, Jefferson wiped away the word “*subjects,*” and wrote “*citizens.*” And that was an important discovery because history books tend to give the impression that the writing of the Declaration (and with it the development of our nation) happened in one grand act.

In such telling, Thomas Jefferson seemingly sat down in 1776, wrote the text as we know it, and founded the nation. But that is a tremendous simplification of what happened. There were several drafts of the Declaration. Changes were made to each draft. And as we see in that most recent discovery, changes were made to the changes before the ink even dried. That should not surprise us, however. The making of our nation wasn’t finished when the ink of that first document dried. And 244 years later, we still are not yet finished in developing a nation where the ideals of “*freedom,*” and “*liberty,*” and “*inalienable rights*” are the enjoyed by all people.

We see this lack of completeness in our very flag. The first flag was created in 1777. It had 13 stars and 13 stripes. In 1794, the pattern went to 15 stars and 15 stripes. In 1818, the stripes were cut to 13 to honor the original colonies, with white stars in a field of blue for each of the 20 states in the union. From that point on, each time a new state was added a new star appeared in the field of blue the following 4th of July. As we think of the flag, it might be helpful to therefore remember that it did not start off the way it looks now. It might also be helpful to remember that periodically there have been pushes to make Puerto Rico a state, as well as the Virgin Islands, Guam, and Samoa. And currently there is a bill in Congress to grant statehood to the District of Columbia. Should any of those places become our 51st state, the flag (and the nation it symbolizes) would transform once again.

That may bother some people. They may want to believe that our nation was complete the day it was founded. But our Founding Fathers did not seem to see things that way. They seemed to know the nation they were birthing would need to live into the fullness of its ideals, and that the founding document they were signing was not just a Declaration of Independence, but also a Declaration of Incompleteness. After all, it took them to 1787 to draft the Constitution. And it caused them to write into that Constitution an amendment process, which has happened 27 times.

We see this idea of incompleteness most fully in one particular phrase in that initial document. That phrase sits in one of it’s most well-known passages, and - as I said - states “*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.*”

For these were smart men. They were educated men. So they surely had to know that such stirring words were incomplete, as they created a governing document that did not allow ALL people the

opportunity to experience “*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*” until the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865. And even with that amendment, 155 years have passed, and (as we see in current events) “*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*” are still not fully experienced by ALL the “*citizens*” of this great nation.

I don't point that out just because of current events. I point it out because the same reality is true in the spiritual realm. In Galatians, we heard Paul say “*you were called to be free.*” We also heard him say “*but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.*” This is because God has not offered to make us free so we might serve ourselves, but so we might serve Him, and love our neighbor. We see this in Jesus' dual command to “*love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,*” and love “*your neighbor as yourself.*” To fully understand this, we need to go back to the beginning.

When theologians speak about what happened in Genesis 3 in the garden of Eden, they talk about what happened there as “the fall.” That phrase refers to how humans - through Adam's sin - had FALLEN away from God. Thus, while humans were created “*in the image of God,*” they ceased reflecting that image. Sin marred the reflection, and all that could be seen as a result was the ugliness Paul speaks about in Galatians: “*immorality, impurity, idolatry, hatred, discord, jealousy, rage, factions, envy; and the like.*” But God was not content to leave humans in that situation. So God did something. God sent the Holy Spirit to recreate each person to the point that they were once again filled with His “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*”

So just as our nation is obviously not finished living into its ideals as delineated in the Declaration of Independence, so we - in our spiritual lives - are not finished living into the ideals of God's kingdom as delineated in the Bible. After all, there are none of us who can say we are completely loving, always joyful, never lacking in peace. There are none of us who can say we are completely patient, always kind, and full of goodness. And there are none of us who can say we are always faithful, entirely gentle, and completely in control of ourselves. This is because it is only when we live in the power the Holy Spirit provides that we are we able to live out the ideals of what it means to be a citizen of God's kingdom. To live by the Spirit, we need to therefore act the same way our nation would act if a 51st state were added: we need to add stars to the flag of our spiritual lives.

The first star we should add to live as a citizen of God's kingdom is to treat others as equals. We see this in the words of Thomas Jefferson, who said in the Declaration of Independence that “*all men are created equal.*” Notice the theology in those words. He said all humans were CREATED equal. This means that we are not greater than others nor less than others. But since we are fallen children of Adam, we often do think of others as less than us. We rank people. We measure people. And we decide - often on the flimsiest of observations - that someone is worth less than us. That is part of what led to slavery in the ancient past. It is what allowed it to continue down to the time of our nation's Founding Fathers. And it is what in many ways has led to nation that says it is “one nation under God” to still not fully address the legacy of slavery.

To move forward then toward a state of true independence and completeness, as a nation and as Christians, we need to remember what being created in God's image is all about. We need to love other as much as God loves us. We need to treat others as equals. And we need to do so even when such behavior costs us something. We see this in the most famous verse in scripture: John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world that HE GAVE HIS SON."*

For in that verse, we see not only that God loves His children so much He laid down His life for them, but also that we - as followers of His Son - are called to love everyone in that same sacrificial way. We hear this in Romans 12 when Paul writes do not *"think of yourself more highly than you ought to think . . . for . . . we who are many, are one body."*

The second star we should add to live as a citizen of God's kingdom is to treat others with favoritism. At first, this might seem to contradict treating people equally. But while the first star suggests that we refrain from behaving negatively toward people (treating them as less equal), this star suggests acting in a positive way by treating every one as if they were our favorite. We see this illustrated in the book The Shack. In that book, Papa (who represents God the Father) speaks of being *"especially fond of"* someone. After this happens several times, the central character asks Papa how someone can be *"especially fond of"* so many people. Papa replies by pointing to the man's own children, and helps him see that while he does not treat any of his children unequally (which is the first star), he also has a positive love for each child, which while different from his love for each of his other children, is a form of favoritism - loving each child as if they were the only one he had.

Returning to the Bible, we see this second star of unconditional favoritism, or love, (with the first star being akin to justice), when Jesus told His disciples to love not only their friends, but also their enemies. We see it when Jesus told His disciples to forgive not just seven times, but seventy seven times. And we see it when Jesus told His disciples to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, and lay down their lives for everyone they met, not just those who treat them well.

Additional stars we should add to live as a citizen of God's kingdom would be to do everything God calls us to do. Maybe God has placed on your heart the desire to join a prayer group. Maybe God has been calling you to help with the Amish Market Ministry. Or maybe God has been telling you He wants you to serve as a Sunday School teacher this fall. Any of those things would be a star to the flag of your spiritual life. For just as the Declaration of Independence was also a Declaration of Incompleteness in terms of the development of our country, so there is more development that needs to occur in our walk with God.

Not that the things God calls us to do are limited to the ministries of the church. There are needs all around us in our community. There are injustices in our nation that need to be righted. There are people in our zip code who need to be helped, healed, and pointed toward God. This is because the mission of the Church is not just to have activities happening within its walls and on its property. The purpose of the Church is to be the Body of Christ in the world, doing what Jesus would have us do to *"preach good news to the poor. . . proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight*

for the blind, to release the oppressed, [and] to proclaim the Lord's favor." For we live in an incomplete world, as Americans and as Christians.

Fortunately, God's power is available to help us with the journey toward completeness - as a nation and as a follower of Jesus. And one of the means of grace God uses to give us the power of the Holy Spirit to continue that journey toward completeness is the sacrament of communion - which we will turn to in a moment. But there are other means of grace that God also uses: prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, ministry, service, and a host of other spiritual growth activities. The question that is therefore before us as we gather together to worship God this day is if we are going to let God help us continue growing closer to completeness, as a nation and as followers of Jesus, or if we - like an undeveloped country - are going to stubbornly remain incomplete: having all the best ideals in mind, but not following through on ever developing those ideals by adding new stars.