

In the Broadway musical Hamilton, there is a song by the King George character. It is titled “You’ll Be Back,” and the lyrics seek to show that the Founding Fathers weren’t just name calling in the Declaration of Independence when they labeled King George a tyrant. That is why in the rest of the song, King George sarcastically refers to his strained relationship with the colonists in romantic phrasings, and then acts like an abusive spouse when he declares that they WILL be coming back to him, for “*when push comes to shove*,” he sings, “*I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love.*”

Which is what happened when King George used his army and navy (as well as mercenaries) to try to stop what historians eventually came to label “*the Great American Experiment.*” What King George would do was therefore first fear the Founding Fathers had when they were preparing to sign the Declaration of Independence. But worrying that King George would try to regain control over the colonists by force wasn’t the only fear the Founding Fathers had about tyranny. They also feared that even if they did get “*the Great American Experiment*” launched, there would always be the danger of a future American citizen trying to rise up as a tyrant.

Thomas Jefferson, for instance, wrote that “*even under the best forms of government those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny.*” James Madison wrote that “*the essence of government is power; and power, lodged as it must be in human hands, will be liable to abuse.*” And George Washington chose not to serve a 3rd term as president because he feared that if he died in office it might create the idea that a president could hold office for life - thereby restoring tyranny.

As with Juneteenth, I do not share that information to give a political speech however. I share it because the temptation to try to control others (which is what the word tyranny means) is - at its core - a spiritual issue. Which is why John Hancock wrote that “*resistance to tyranny is the Christian and social duty of each individual.*” It is why Ben Franklin wrote that “*rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.*” And it is why in the book of Samuel God told the prophet “*it is not you they have rejected, but Me*” when they pushed him to anoint a king over them.

It is also why Samuel then told the people about how the king they wanted to rule over them would soon become a tyrant, warning “*this is what the king who will reign over you will do: he will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses. Some he will assign to . . . plow his ground and reap his harvest. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves.*” The reason is simple. As Paul wrote in Romans, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” And one of the ways humans sin and fall short of the glory of God is by trying to control others.

We see this in the passage from Luke. That is because while the scenarios there seem to be about different things, they each speak to the single human tendency to resist the freedom God wills ALL His children to have by one person trying to control another. That is because while in the first book

of the Bible, Genesis, we are told that we have a responsibility to be our “*brother’s keeper*” (which means taking care of others and looking out for their freedom) sin tempts us to try to control (or be a tyrant over) others. And when we give in to that temptation, all kinds of evil happens. Let’s look at the 3 incidents to see how this fall from grace happens, AND what Jesus said about why we should guard against it.

In the first incident, Luke tells us “*an argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.*” AN ARGUMENT. Not a discussion. Not a debate. AN ARGUMENT. And they were not sincerely arguing about what they thought was best for the coming kingdom. Each one was selfishly trying to take control of the others. Which is why an “argument” broke out. Not that this is the only time the temptation to control others flared up between them. Mark tells us in his gospel that one day James and John (out of earshot of the others) asked Jesus to “*let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.*” The request was not to have a prestigious seat to watch Jesus reign in the coming kingdom. The request was to give them the authority in His coming kingdom to control not only the other 10 disciples, but the world. And we know that is what they were asking because Mark tells us when “*the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.*”

We also know this is what was happening because Mark tells us Jesus replied by calling them together and telling ALL of them that “*those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. [But it is not to be so] with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*” Here in Luke, Jesus “*took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me welcomes the One who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.’*”

In the second incident, Luke tells us the temptation to control others was so strong that what Jesus said went right over their heads. As a result, John said “*Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.*” In this incident, there are 2 things to note. First, the disciples saw someone delivering people from demons “*in Jesus’ name.*” And rather than rejoicing that Jesus’ name was so powerful that even those not in their band of followers could call upon it to deliver people from demonic possession, they got upset they he wasn’t in their guild. Second, instead of asking Jesus if this was appropriate or not, they tried to pull rank by ordering them to stop. But think about that. They were so fixated on controlling others, they commanded someone to stop delivering people from demonic possession. And while the text doesn’t say who the “*we*” was who did that, it was probably John and James (as they had just shown their tyrannical tendencies when they asked to be Jesus #2 and #3 in power.) Which is why Jesus said “*do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you.*”

In the final scenario, Luke tells us that as the time got closer for Jesus to “*give his life as a ransom for many,*” they still didn’t fully understand the call to be about the ministry of giving freedom to all

God's children's freedom rather than trying to be a tyrant over others. So, when "*Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem,*" and "*sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him,*" and "*the people there did not welcome him,*" their sinfully tyrannical hearts became enraged. And in their tyrannical rage, "*James and John . . . asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'*" That must have broken Jesus' heart, as He replied to their obtuse inability (or unwillingness) to overcome the temptation to tyranny by rebuking them.

Before we are too hard on the disciples for not understanding the freedom Jesus had come to offer the world, we may want to examine our own lives however. That is because the sinful tendency toward tyranny exhibited in the 3 incidents in this passage is also a temptation we face. "*But I don't try to control others,*" someone might say. "*And I'm not a tyrant!*" someone else might declare. But that may not be the case. We ALL like to have things run our way. Each of us likes to have our world arranged the way we want it arranged. And we all get angry when someone "*upsets our apple cart*" by not meeting our expectations or when someone makes life difficult for us. And what's even worse is that in our anger at having someone "*upset our apple cart,*" we can be tempted to try to control (or be a tyrant over) that person in response.

To see how tyrannical we can be, and to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit calling us to instead promote the freedom Christ came to bring all people, ponder the following question.

Do people say you are:	Strong Willed?	Authoritarian?	Opinionated?		
Stubborn?	Bossy?	Manipulative?	Strict?	Oppressive?	Demanding?

In addition, to the word "controlling," those words are also synonyms of the word "*tyrannical.*" We may find ourselves tempted to be any - or all - of those things as we relate to others. But if we give in to that temptation, it makes us a tyrant because we are seeking to control others as if we are a king or queen and other people merely the subjects of our empire. But God calls us to a different type of life! Jesus, the Christ, said however that HE had come not to "*be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" So He tells us in the Luke passage that if WE want to be Christ-follower, a Christian, we must follow His example and seek to be "*the least*" of those around us. He says we are to understand that "*he who is not against you is for you.*" And He says He will rebuke us if our response to others not doing what we want is - like a tyrant - to try to call down figurative "*fire from heave to destroy them.*"

But the temptation be a tyrant (even just occasionally) and not to always strive to create freedom for everyone around us, is great. We see this in the musical 1776. It was about the writing of the Declaration of Independence, and in one scene when the Continental Congress was debating what the final text of the document would be, a delegate objected to the word "*tyrant*" in reference to King George. He then asked if Jefferson would consent to removing the word. "*I do not consent,*" Jefferson replied, "*[for] the king IS a tyrant whether we say so or not. We might as well say so.*" Charles Thomson, the congress secretary then said, "*but I already scratched it out.*" "*Then scratch it back in!*" Jefferson yelled. Which prompted John Hancock, the Congress's president, to say "*put it back, Mr. Thomson. The King will remain a tyrant.*"

“The king will remain a tyrant.” And so will WE as long as we continue to try to be a wannabe king (or a wannabe queen) who seeks to control others rather than strive to help the people around us be the free children of God they were created to be. But changing our stripes is not easy. To be the freedom creating beings God calls us to be we must follow Jesus’ command to *“lay down your life and pick up your cross.”* And that is not easy to do.

Laying down our lives and picking up our cross requires that we be generous with our TIME, using a faithful portion of it to do things for others and not just ourselves. But selfishness can easily get in the way, and we can be tempted to see our time as ours alone and not something God calls us to use to help other people. Laying down our lives and picking up our cross requires that we be generous with our TALENT, using a faithful portion of the abilities, skills, and talents God has given us to build up His kingdom by serving others and not just to make ourselves happy. And laying down our lives and picking up our cross requires that we be generous with our treasure, using a faithful portion of it to support the work of Jesus through His Church so that (as we say in our mission statement) we can *“introduce people to Jesus, help them become His faithful followers, and equip them to share His love with others.”*

Today is therefore the day to ask if we truly wish to celebrate independence. That is because independence doesn’t apply only to us. We can’t live as wannabe kings (and wannabe queens) who tyrannically control others, and still have them be free. As we see in the passage from Luke, we must *“welcome”* everyone, and not stop anyone from living out the life God has for them, and rebuke anyone who acts like a tyrant. For that is what it means to celebrate independence.