

“Freedom Day: What Does It Mean to Be a Lighthouse for Christ?”

Sunday, July 3, 2022

by Rev. Norwood N. Hingle III, Ph.D.

Freedom is good. But when you get freedom, what counts is what the person does with it. E.g., tomorrow we are celebrating Independence Day, when America won its independence from Great Britain. Now that they had their Freedom Day, now what? There was a period where we kind of wandered a bit as a new, united nation, where we did not quite find our identity, and the British seized on this and we had the War of 1812. That forced us to establish our identity and become especially united as a nation. E.g., last month our nation celebrated Juneteenth which recognizes the freedom of African Americans from slavery. Now that they had their Freedom Day, now what? For many of those freed there was a time of wondering what freedom meant for them. I have understood that many slaves went back to live with and work for their former masters. E.g. many of us know new freedoms, such as when we got out of college and lived on our own, or got our driver’s license— what do we do now? What are the boundaries I am going to respect, etc.? For us, this Sunday marks a Freedom Day of sorts for us, as we are now an independent church, having gained our independence from The United Methodist Church. This is a bittersweet time for us. There is much that we loved about The UMC— it certainly was not slavery for us! But we also recognized it was going places, taking positions which we believe are incompatible with the Christian faith. So the question comes for us, now that we have our Freedom Day, now what? Our passage has been seminal for us in the past, and it is especially so for us now.

READ Matthew 5:14-16 (p. 4)

CONTEXT: Jesus is preaching in the Sermon on the Mount. He has just gone over the comforting words of the beatitudes, and He has told His followers who they are— they are those who are blessed when they are reviled and persecuted, and they are the salt of the earth. Now Jesus gives them further clarification as to who they are as His followers.

READ v 14. “V 14 is programmatic: You (emphatic) are the light of the world, like the Crescent City Connection seen from the Moon Walk at night!” Admittedly, we don’t have many hills in New Orleans, unless you count Monkey Hill and the levees! But, have you ever been on the Moon Walk at night and seen the bridges spanning the Mississippi River? Or driven at night over the huge bridge on I-10 going over the Industrial Canal? The view of the Crescent City Connection is beautiful, and difficult to miss, as it is lit up in a breathtaking way! That is what Jesus is saying about His followers. Note that the “you” is the first word in v 14 and is actually stated instead of just implied by the verb ending indicating the second person plural. So, Jesus is emphasizing that we, His followers, are to stand out, and that is part of the “program” of following Him. E.g., I recall talking to leaders at the Women’s New Life Clinic, a pro life group that reaches out to women thinking about an abortion, and how they told me they strategically locate their centers near abortion centers and Planned Parenthood buildings so that they will stand out and women can know there is an alternative; as a result, their work has helped overturn Roe v Wade, by God’s grace. E.g., a football coach at a public school was praying after football games at the middle of the football field, and people saw it and joined him, without his asking them to do so. As a result, he was fired, but he challenged it all the way to the Supreme Court and was vindicated, by God’s grace! We stand out when we pray in public. E.g., I recall in college at UNO we sometimes had Bible studies out in the open on

campus and people passed by going to and fro with classes. I felt self-conscious and awkward by singing songs and talking about the Bible in public like that, but the Lord had to teach me to be comfortable standing out, essentially being a light for Him.

READ v 15. “V 15 is a practical illustration: to place a lamp under a large basket (one that could hold 8.75 liters of grain) is absurd.” We in the West don’t quite get it as to what it is like to walk outside and experience total darkness— our street lights and building lights help give us some illumination. Have you ever experienced total darkness, away from civilization? E.g., I recall when I was Ghana visiting the interior of the country my group and I were visiting a village at night in our car, and when we arrived, it was totally dark, and I felt it. Suddenly, there were faces coming toward me in the dark that I could barely see, and that felt disconcerting. Finally, someone got us some light, and guided us toward a place where they worshipped, and we could share with them. E.g., we experience darkness when our electricity goes out, as when Hurricane Zeta hit a couple of years ago; flashlights were a high priority in our house, and to have them but refuse to use them would have been quite injurious to those inside the house! In the same way, we have the light of Jesus, who gives us meaning in life, who gives us forgiveness for all our sins, who desires to make our lives good from the inside-out. He desires to give us unconditional love, and a peace that passes all understanding, and to offer us a place in His Father’s house forever. To know someone who does not know the Lord and to keep silent about it is highly injurious, along the lines of someone wandering in a house, falling over furniture and hurting themselves, with the electricity cut off and not letting them know you have a flashlight in our pocket.

READ v 16. “V 16 is the intended result: so that people may see our good works and praise God! Cf. 1 Peter 2:11-12.” In the same way that we use a lamp

to give light to all in the house, so the result of our following Jesus should be that we should be conspicuous to others outside the church as to our good living and they give credit and praise to God. Have you ever seen this? E.g., I recall a few years ago there was a flood in Baton Rouge and Livingston Parish, and many people were out of their homes and in need of groceries and supplies like diapers and water. There was a church in the area that had converted a room to being a supply store of such items, and people were coming from the area to get free supplies at the church—that church’s help made them conspicuous as followers of Christ. E.g., I recall after Katrina we allowed the fire department to put a shower trailer on our lawn—before the playground was there—and we housed Mennonites who helped people for free with gutting out houses and repairs—we were conspicuous for our good works to the neighborhood, and the Lord was glorified. E.g., I recall a while back we had a Bible study group that did random acts of kindness by giving cold water bottles to people at the lakefront and local strip mall, and we were to say, “This is an expression of God’s love for you”, but one in the group wanted to know if we could just give out the water bottles and say nothing. So I checked with the person who started the program, and he said we definitely had to say this, because it pointed people away from us and our good works and to the Lord, who can fill their thirst in life for eternity and save their souls.

“What is your and my role to help the Lord’s new church fulfill this vision?” God has given us on this Freedom Day the opportunity to serve Him in a Bible-centered ministry with an identity we did not have before. So, the question going forward is, What now? What will be your role and my role? Leading a prayer group or Bible study during lunch at work one day a week? Prayer Walks with me in the neighborhood? Visiting widows and orphans? The sky is the limit,

because the Holy Spirit has empowered each of us for ministry to live out being the Lighthouse for Christ Church!