

Psalm 66:1-9

66 Shout joyfully to God, all the earth!

² Sing praises to the glory of God's name!

Make glorious his praise!

³ Say to God:

"How awesome are your works!

Because of your great strength,
your enemies cringe before you.

⁴ All the earth worships you,

sings praises to you,
sings praises to your name!" *Selah*

⁵ Come and see God's deeds;

his works for human beings are awesome:

⁶ He turned the sea into dry land

so they could cross the river on foot.

Right there we rejoiced in him!

⁷ God rules with power forever;

keeps a good eye on the nations.

So don't let the rebellious exalt themselves. *Selah*

⁸ All you nations, bless our God!

Let the sound of his praise be heard!

⁹ God preserved us among the living;

he didn't let our feet slip a bit.

Galatians 6:1-16

⁶ Brothers and sisters, if a person is caught doing something wrong, you who are spiritual should restore someone like this with a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves so you won't be tempted too. ² Carry each other's burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ If anyone thinks they are important when they aren't, they're fooling themselves. ⁴ Each person should test their own work and be happy with doing a good job and not compare themselves with others. ⁵ Each person will have to carry their own load.

⁶ Those who are taught the word should share all good things with their teacher. ⁷ Make no mistake, God is not mocked. A person will harvest what they plant. ⁸ Those who plant only for their own benefit will harvest devastation from their selfishness, but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹ Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up. ¹⁰ So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith.

¹¹ Look at the large letters I'm making with my own handwriting! ¹² Whoever wants to look good by human standards will try to get you to be circumcised, but only so they won't be harassed for the cross of Christ. ¹³ Those who are circumcised don't observe the Law themselves, but they want you to be circumcised, so they can boast about your physical body.[a]

14 But as for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through him, and I have been crucified to the world. 15 Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn't mean anything. What matters is a new creation. 16 May peace and mercy be on whoever follows this rule and on God's Israel.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

Martin Niemöller
Lutheran Pastor, Holocaust Survivor, & Eventual Nazi Critic

Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe.

Elie Wiesel
Jewish Aremnian Professor, Holocaust Survivor

Tomorrow, we commemorate July 4th, our nation's independence day, the day on which we declared our separation from a tyrannous monarch and our ability to determine our own future as a nation. We declare, once again, our freedom on the 4th of July . Well, if we're honest, most will just commemorate this freedom with a day off, a bunch of food on the grill, too much to drink, and a day of recreation at the park, on the lake, or at the river. How we use this holiday declares that we take this freedom *individually*. So often in our culture we freedom so radically personal that we live without a care for what others think, or how our actions affect others, or what responsibility we might bear for others. We believe ourselves so incredibly independent, we esteem ourselves so highly, that we've scientifically named ourselves "Homo Sapiens Sapiens:" the wise person that reflects on her own wisdom. That's our national heritage, even the heritage of our biological species, but it is not our spiritual heritage.

In Galatians today, we hear a call to "carry each other's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ." In the face of our independence day, we hear instead a word

of our radical **dependence** upon God and one another. Our call is not to become more independent, not to set ourselves off from one another, but to become interdependent, for that is what it means to bear one another's burdens. We're meant to rely fully upon God and one another so that others may rely on us.

Carry each other's burdens. This seems simple enough, at first. Help an older person carry their groceries. Hold the door for new parents carrying children and diaper bags in tow. Help cover the rent for someone who just lost their job when the factory moved out of the area. Donate food to Beans and Rice, clothes to the Radford Clothing Bank, supplies to the Women's Resource Center. In many ways, we're used to bearing the burdens of others, at least in these relatively simple and often convenient ways.

But what about when the burdens balloon? When they get really, really difficult? When we see more than 60 million refugees across the world, or even the relatively smaller but no less significant number of 5,100 children in need of foster care and adoption in Virginia, we feel like the burdens are simply too big to bear. It seems that's how Martin Niemoller felt, the Lutheran pastor who wrote the words that began this sermon. He eventually realized that bearing one another's burdens, however hard and however frightening, has life and death consequences for others and ourselves. We don't speak on behalf of others to benefit ourselves – that's narcissism writ large – BUT to create a world where justice is possible for everyone, we must speak out against the unjust. We must offer safety in word and deed to those who are facing oppression, facing violence, facing death in whatever myriad forms that we see in the world.

Fortunately, there are people in the world that give us hope, people like Glenn and Sarah Black. When Michelle and I were in college, Glenn and Sarah were

wonderful mentors to our campus ministry. In their thirties at the time, they had no children of their own and all signs suggested that they were content to live life that way moving forward. At some point, though, God moved them to consider becoming foster parents. It's a whiplash transition to go from having no kids one day to four children the next, but that's exactly what happened with their first foster experience. As Glenn and Sarah see it, this is a burden they can bear in order to bless others, and not a burden they regret one bit. Currently Glenn and Sarah serve as parents to a 17 year-old and an infant who they don't just watch over, but care for, provide for, invest in, love. And you know what? Through that sacrifice, as they bear the burdens of broken families in our society, as they bring hope and stability into the lives of innocent children, they too have benefitted, they too have grown, because their happiness, their love, is now shaped by presence of these children.

Martin Luther's Theology of the Two Governments helps us to make sense of the difference between our national and personal independence and our religious and spiritual dependence. You might be more used to hearing this called the Two Kingdoms, but there's a small but significant problem with that: Luther never used that phrase. He talked about two governments, about the spheres of influence under which humanity lives, because we only have one true king, whose name is Jesus. For Luther, this simply meant that the church shouldn't have official rule in the state, and that the state shouldn't have official rule in the church. Ideally, this prevents corruption in one realm from poisoning the other, something Luther saw too often in the overextension of the Pope's authority in medieval Europe.

These governments also serve different purposes. For Luther, the proper role of the state is to preserve order, or as Luther says it, "the laws of the state extend no further

than to life and to property and what is external on earth.” On the other hand, Luther views the church's role in developing belief, spreading faith, and care for whole human person. In our American context, the state preserves our national and personal freedoms, our relative independence, to ensure that no one is persecuted. In our Lutheran context, the church reminds us of our ultimate interdependence upon God and others, that our freedom in Christ is meant for service to all of God's creation.

What we must remember at all costs is that both governments remain subject to God. They have limited authority and limited scope. The realms of church and of state are meant to serve divine purposes, and so whenever either one contradicts God's will, God's hopes and dreams for the world, we must remember that we remain first citizens of God's kingdom.

One such example of that is when our nation tells us our individual freedoms are more important than the burdens of others, that we should protect our personal freedoms even at the detriment of other portions of God's creation. When we're told that the needs of certain “other” people aren't as important as our own – when we let our fear separate us from others – then our freedom has become an idol, has become a perversion of God's good gift.

If you saw yesterday's paper, then you likely know where we're headed with this. An organization called Concerned Citizens of Radford has been speaking out against the potential for refugee resettlement here. Unfortunately, these citizens don't seem too concerned with safety or civility, because there've been implied threats of violence against refugees. We stand together and condemn those hateful implications in the name of Jesus, the one who suffered violence so that we might live in peace. I'm also calling on city council directly to do the same.

What this group has said more overtly is that we just don't have enough resources in Radford to take care of the people in our town who live in poverty. Now, let's be clear. The on-record poverty rate for Radford is 32%, but this number is inflated by the number of university students who live in functional poverty for more than ½ the year in off campus housing in the city of Radford. We also have the largest amount of Section 8 Housing per capita in the state, and these living quarters create opportunities for affordable living for people struggling to make a living wage. Both students and Section 8 housing are ultimately good things, for as a community we make space for young people growing in their vocations and for people of all ages who need a safe and affordable place to live when other options aren't accessible to them. As a city, we're bearing burdens with them and together, we make a better community. The point is that these Concerned Citizens of Radford say we just don't have enough to take care of refugees because we need to take care of our own first. They want to remain independent, to not bear the burdens of refugees.

We're called to be concerned citizens, friends. That's for sure. But we're not called to be concerned only for ourselves. We're called to be citizens of God's kingdom concerned with all of God's creation. We're called to bear the burdens of our neighbors in Radford and our neighbors in Somalia and our neighbors in the Syria, in Burma, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and wherever else we find people with burdens that we might bear in the name of Jesus. These people deserve to become the center of our universe because the injustice that they face grieves the heart of God and threatens the life of God's creation. We can and must bear the burdens of the human family, regardless of citizenship, regardless of political agenda, regardless of whatever fears

may lie to us and tell us that we live in scarcity, for our God is a God of abundance, of strength, of conviction, of compassion, and there is plenty for us to share.

On this Independence Day weekend, God's calling us to dependence. To depend upon God, and to become reliable for others who need to depend on us. God's purpose for us in our liberation is to become liberators for others. God is no tyrant. God will not force us to this end. But we've seen the way that God has called us forward, where God wipes away every tear from every eyes, where there is no more mourning, crying, pain, or even death. In this meal, the sign of God's commitment to inclusive love and the very presence of our God in Christ, we taste a future where hate cannot survive because of the palpable presence of love.

As a church, as members of the Radford community, let's become a taste of that future for our community. Let's let the love of Christ become so palpable in our lives that no matter of fear, no matter of prejudice, no matter of selfishness would keep the love of God from any one in need. Let us, the Body of Christ alive in the world, wipe away every tear, not just from the eyes of people in the New River Valley, but from every eye that cries. Let us follow the lead of Niemoller and Wiesel and speak out for all in need, even the refugees, for God has already spoken for us. I leave you one last quote from Elie Wiesel. "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." That's how we bear one another's burdens. We act for the good of all, no matter the odds stacked against us.