

- This coming week we will celebrate Independence Day; a day when we as a country celebrate our freedom. As a history buff, I like to re-read the “Declaration of Independence” this time of year.
- It is an amazing document (check it out- Google it!!). It takes us back to a time in our country where there was little if any freedom. We get a real feel for how badly those individuals thirsted for freedom. We get a sense of how the authors of the Declaration struggled to define “freedom”.
- One of the most famous sentences in the Declaration of Independence reads as follows: “ *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...*” Even back then, the founders of our country knew that part of the definition of freedom is that it is a gift from God!
- The last sentence of the Declaration is not nearly as well known but should be of real interest to us as Christians because it reveals another part of the definition of freedom. The last sentence reads: “ *And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of God... we pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.*” Even back then they understood freedom involves looking out for and taking care of the other guy.
- As a people who have the blessing of living free for a very long time we can, at times, fall into the trap of taking freedom for granted or misunderstanding what freedom really is. So what is *real* freedom?
- Sometimes to understand or define something, it helps to look at what that thing is **not**. There are two extremes that are wrong ideas, mistakes about real freedom.
- Mistake #1- Freedom is a license to do whatever you want. There are no limits, no rules, and no roadmaps. I am the judge of myself and I can do as I please. This is not *real* freedom. This view of freedom leaves God out; leaves others out. This view of freedom reflects a lack of trust in God and God’s wisdom.
- Mistake #2 – is the other extreme. A belief there is no real freedom. Forces beyond my control structure and control my life. God moves me like a piece on a chessboard. This view is also a misunderstanding of freedom. It ignores the fact *we* have

accountability and responsibility for our actions. It leaves us out. This view lacks trust in God's wisdom and His desire for us to be free.

- So what is *real* freedom?
- First and foremost it is a gift from God. It is an exceptional sign we are made in the image and likeness of God (Our freedom makes us most resemble God because God is free!)
- Real freedom is our ability to become who we were meant to be; become who we were created to be – Children of God.
- Real freedom is the ability to realize our true nature...and what is that? Goodness. We were made good. Our nature is goodness.
- There is a natural law God has written on each of our hearts: Love God and love others.
- Real freedom cooperates with that natural law; never works against it.
- Real freedom is looking into your heart to find God; to find God's will in every situation – right here in this world right now.
- If we are truly free we make the choices that allow us to fully realize who we are and what we are destined for. Choices that bring us closer to goodness, closer to God.
- In today's Gospel Jesus talks about these choices. But the passage requires some explaining. Jesus tells us: *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*
- In other words, Jesus tells us give God top priority. Put God ahead of everything else in our lives. No one is to be more important; not father, mother, wife, husband, or child. No career, no work, *nothing* is to be more important than doing God's will.
- This can be hard for us to hear. You might be thinking right now “that's impossible, I can't do it”. That reaction is normal, we are accustomed to giving ourselves completely to our loved ones (especially our children).
- But get past the first reaction. Really think about it. Putting *God* first is not that hard and it makes perfect sense.
- Everything we have, the people, the things, the events in our lives are given to us as a gift from God. It all comes from Him. How

could we not love Him most for providing us with these things we cherish?

- Think about it further, when we put God first, spend time with God and listen for His voice, what He really tells us is: *“I love you dearly. You are precious to me. You are my children. Go and be free to love each other. Use the gifts and talents I have given you to make life better for each other. Bring my love to everyone and lead them to me. Help them to know me. I am here with and for you.”*
- This is *true* freedom. Nothing suffers or is neglected when we put God first. It only gets better. Better than we could have hoped or dreamed for. It's not losing anything – it's gaining everything.