

Sermon on the Sunday following 250th Independence Day (7/5/2026)

“What Is Real Freedom?”

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This weekend, America has been celebrating a remarkable milestone—250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Across this nation, there have been fireworks lighting up the night sky, parades moving through small towns and big cities, flags waving in front yards, and families gathering around tables filled with food that somehow always tastes better when shared on a holiday.

We celebrate freedom because freedom is one of the deepest longings of the human heart. People will travel great distances, endure great hardship, and even sacrifice their lives for the hope of freedom. Whether in America, in India, or anywhere else in the world, the desire to be free is written into the human story.

Of course, freedom means different things to different people. Ask a small child what freedom is, and you might hear: “Eating ice cream before dinner.” Ask a teenager, and freedom means: “Parents should stop asking questions.” Ask someone who is retired, and freedom means: “Grandchildren visiting... and then going home before things get too loud.” And if I ask my son, Varun, what freedom means to him, he says it's having the dish he never cooks but expects his father to cook for him.

We smile, because we recognize something true in all of that. But underneath the humor is a deeper question that every generation must eventually face:

What is real freedom? All freedom is not the same. And not all freedom leads to life. The story of freedom is not only an American story. It is a human story. And even more deeply, it is a biblical story. We begin today with a woman named Rebekah.

In Genesis 24, Abraham's servant travels to find a wife for Isaac. He arrives at a well, and there he meets Rebekah. When the moment comes for Rebekah to decide whether to leave her family and go with a stranger into an unknown future, she is asked a simple question: "Will you go with this man?" And Rebekah responds with one of the most remarkable sentences in Scripture: "I will go." That is not coercion. That is not manipulation. That is not compulsion. That is freedom. Rebekah is not merely a passive character in God's story. She is a participant in it. Her story does not end with her courageous "I will go." In fact, that is only the beginning of her journey into the complexity of freedom.

Later, when Isaac is old, and the blessing of the firstborn is at stake, Rebekah orchestrates a plan for Jacob to receive the blessing meant for Esau. She prepares the meal. She dresses Jacob. She coaches him through the encounter with his father. And we are left with an uncomfortable question that interpreters have wrestled with for centuries:

What do we do with Rebekah here? Is she a schemer? Is she manipulative? We reduce complex lives into simple labels. A person is "good" or "bad." A decision is "right" or "wrong." A woman is a "saint" or a "schemer."

And once we assign the label, we stop seeing the person. And it is what happens again and again in life. Even Jesus was not immune to this. The religious leaders say of Him: "He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Notice what is happening. They cannot categorize Him. So they label Him. They reduce Him. They dismiss Him. Stereotypes are often the enemy of truth.

I wonder, if Jesus is stereotyped as a glutton, what kind of stereotype correctly fits for me? But I struggle to find out because I also wrestle, as Paul wrestles, to categorize myself. Paul wrestles to find an answer. "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Paul is describing the fracture within the human self. We are divided creatures. Through

our fractured beingness, we learn something important: Freedom is not simply the ability to choose. Freedom is the ability to become whole. Freedom is not only external. It is deeply internal.

And here is where Rebekah and Paul begin to speak to each other across Scripture. Rebekah acts freely. Paul struggles to act freely. Together, they reveal that freedom is not a possession. It is a process. It is a process that creates tension in ordinary life. Families know this well. Sometimes husbands and wives negotiate freedom in marriage with great creativity—and occasional misunderstanding. We are all trying to figure out what freedom looks like in shared life. What then is real freedom? The Scripture is leading us somewhere unexpected. It is leading us to Jesus, who says: “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, “Try harder.” He does not say, “Choose better.” He does not say, “Be more disciplined.” He says: “Come to me.” Freedom, for Jesus, is not first an achievement. It is a relationship. And then He adds something even more surprising:

“Take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Here, yoke is a symbol of shared direction. Jesus is not offering independence. He is offering a new kind of dependence.

We see three movements of freedom: a willing response from Rebekah, a divided struggle of Paul, and a healing invitation from Jesus. And the final word on freedom does not belong to Rebekah or Paul. The real freedom belongs to Christ.

This brings us back, briefly, to where we began—this moment of national celebration. As America marks 250 years of independence, we give thanks for the vision of freedom that has shaped a nation. We honor the sacrifices made, the struggles endured, and the ongoing pursuit of liberty, justice, and dignity for all people. Freedom is a precious gift. But Scripture gently

reminds us that political freedom, as vital as it is, cannot heal the deepest fractures of the human heart. A nation may be free while its people remain bound by fear. A society may be independent while its citizens remain captive to anger, prejudice, greed, or despair. And even within families and communities, we discover that freedom is not always simple. We are still learning how to live freely with one another.

And yet, the gospel speaks a deeper word: a true liberation of the souls and this freedom that is not fragile, not partial, not temporary—but whole. St. Augustine of Hippo talks about this wholeness of freedom, which is possible in Christ. He says,

“You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” That restlessness is what Paul describes. That restlessness is what Rebekah steps into. That restlessness is what nations feel when they pursue freedom. And that rest is what Christ offers. “Come to me.” That is the invitation that goes deeper than every constitution and every declaration: That is real freedom. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.