

At the 10 am service on July 4, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Galatians 5:13-14; Galatians 3:27-28 and Matthew 5:9.

“July 4 and the 2010 Soccer World Cup”

As most of us know, the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa has provided illustrations and themes for my sermons in June and July. The themes have been: coaching, players to watch, and last week, goal. Today, the theme combines two themes: July 4 and the World Cup.

We'll skip the World Cup next Sunday since the “sermon” for the service will be the children and youth presentation of “Dave the Wave and the Giant Kahuna.” My World Cup series will continue through the Sundays of July.

The first theme today is July 4 and a statement about God, national holidays and freedom: As Christians we affirm the separation of church and state and avoid the danger of too-close ties between Christianity and the government but we affirm God's presence in all things. Therefore, God is in the midst of national holidays.

The ever-present God moves through every aspect of our lives. There are no godless zones and that includes nations, governments, peacemaking and military service.

Independence Day involves recognition of important moments in our nation's story and the gifts we have received as citizens of our nation. While there is much to repent (and realities of genocide and slavery as well as the upsurge in anti-immigrant sentiments call us to confession and not denial), there is also much to celebrate in our national adventure.

We celebrate freedom. One of the freedoms is the freedom to sit here without harassment and to hear Paul's words to the Galatians: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another, for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:13-14)

“Slave” for Paul is a metaphor for love without cost. Paradoxically, we are slaves and yet we are free. For Paul, the best way to exercise our freedom in this and any country is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Author William Faulkner is famously quoted as saying: “We must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practice it.” Freedom for Christians is the practice of love and God is most significantly in July 4th when we love one another. The implications of love are enormous. The hurting inhabitants in the Gulf are crying out for practical love.

We now move on to the 2010 Soccer World Cup: One just has to watch the games to see the national pride that goes into each game. Thirty-two teams are representing their countries and each game begins with the national anthem and a huge display of the flag of each country.

Soccer annals are full of stories where governments have remained strong or fallen after the outcome of a soccer World Cup performance. When something goes wrong with a team at the world cup as recently displayed by France and Nigeria the heads of state are drawn into the fray. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who was at the German/Argentina game yesterday felt a great boost when her team astoundingly and convincingly beat Argentina 4-0.

The host country South Africa is a great example of how sports can unite a nation. The movie "Invictus" told the true story of how Nelson Mandela, the leader of a newly independent South Africa, broke racial barriers by affirming whites in their major sport rugby, thereby opening the door of rugby to blacks and moving the nation towards healing and reconciliation. This contributed to South Africa's successful bid to host the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

The World Cup like the Olympics is a wonderful opportunity for the world to see countries competing in friendly competition where the teams meet on the field of sports and not on plains of war.

This is what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9) and what Paul intended when he wrote: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:27-28)

In a way, Paul is telling us not to be too comfortable with national differences. In spite of these differences, Christianity affirms a higher path of unity. The 2010 FIFA World Cup teaches us that while we love our own country we also embrace the world with friendship and fair play.

Some people call this day of independence a day of interdependence. Both are fine by me for while we celebrate our independence as a country we also affirm and appreciate our interdependence with all the countries of the world.

God bless America and God bless the world! Amen.