

**“Divine Rights”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Dr. John Syster**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**July 5, 2015**

Arguably, “A Field of Dreams” is the best baseball movie of all time. It’s a simple story. Its essence is a young farmer who is in trouble financially. He hears a voice that tells him to plow up part his field of corn, mostly grown, and make a baseball diamond. His neighbors, of course, think he is crazy, but he has this voice that is telling him what to do. He gathers a few other people to go with him on his journey and brings them back to the field and, suddenly, baseball players from the past start walking out of the cornfield and onto the diamond—Ty Cobb, “Shoeless” Joe Jackson — some of the greatest baseball players ever. The young farmer and his family sit in the stands that were built right at the edge of the field, and they watch the baseball players, excited about what they see. Soon we learn that not everyone has seen the players, only those who believe can see them playing. Others see simply an empty baseball field. In the end, one of the players who comes to play on the field is the farmer’s father, a vagabond baseball player who left the family early in the farmer’s life, and suddenly there is a reconciliation that would not have otherwise been possible, but he dared to dream.

When you think of the burgeoning United States of America back in 1775 that had a little history of what is going on between these United States and the England that they knew, there was a succession of British monarchs named George — very immediately, George I, II and III. George I was chosen as the first of the Hanover line of kings in England because his mother was the granddaughter of King James of the King James Bible that we often hear about. It was a relatively loose connection, but he was the only Protestant in the line of succession that anyone could find, so he became the king of England. He was also a monarch of a good portion of what is now Germany. He didn’t speak a word of English and never did. He actually did all his English transactions in French, and for the most part he continued to live in Germany. His was an interesting family as well. His wife was his cousin. They had two children and he lost interest in her and preferred to relate to his mistress. Then, when she developed an interest into Swedish royalty, he had that mistress confined to her own room for the next 30 years. Well, he and his mistress spent money frivolously.

He was succeeded by his only legitimate son. His name was George II, of course. George II was not beloved by his father but he was, as it turns out, a pretty good king. He was the last English monarch to lead the armies of England into battle, and the battle fought was against the Catholic Church’s choice to be king. The one in line to the throne was probably actually closer in line than George, but he was Catholic, and they wanted him to be Protestant, so when he died, his grandson took over as king of England, George III. George III is the one who was talked about in the Declaration of Independence. He actually was not a bad man. He was a good family man. He was faithful to his wife. They had 15 children—lots of heirs to the English throne. He was not responsible for all the atrocities written about in the Declaration of Independence that we did not read you this morning. Actually, those were passed by Parliament, but his hands were tied, and Parliament’s hands were tied because they needed money. The previous kings had developed such a large debt that they were going broke simply paying off the interest on the debt, so they began to pass laws and to do things to pay for the war that was going on in America between the French and the Native Americans, and that is what caused those who lived in these 13 colonies to be upset.

When the battle of Bunker Hill took place in 1775, about 1/3 of the people in this country wanted to be independent of England. Another 1/3 wanted to stay with England, and another 1/3 just wanted to be left alone. It was not the majority by any stretch of the imagination, but there was this will to be free. There was this will that said, “Why are we ruled by some man because he was the son of the previous king or the grandson of the previous king?” What is it that claims a divine right to rule? Did God declare that this particular person should rule over us?

In the passage of scripture that Jeanne read from the Gospel of Mark, we hear the story of Jesus healing in the midst of the people. Now, normally you would think that healing is a very good thing. If you've got a disease and someone comes along and heals you, whether it is a mental or a physical disorder, you are joyous, but the leaders of the Temple could not allow this to continue. If the people saw that this carpenter's son was able to heal by the grace of God, the people would begin to believe that this Jesus was somehow closer to God than they were. They felt it was their divine right to be the leaders of the Temple—that they were the ones who were in control of the religious situation in Israel, so they decided they would say it was the devil who was the one giving Him the power to heal. The devil made Him do it. You know, it's actually fairly common in our time. We don't always say it's the devil. Sometimes we say it is the communists or the liberals or the Jews, but it is some scapegoat that we can find.

In my journey of life, I've done some work on family systems theory. They say that family is a system and that how that system is structured has something to do with how life is lived out in a particular family. One of my professors applied this to the work in the church. He was a seminary professor. He said that how the system of the church is put together often determines how the church lives out its life. He used some examples, and I have learned something from my own experience.

Here is an example that makes sense that I want to share with you this morning. It is one where there was a senior minister and an associate minister of a church. The associate minister, after a couple of years, had a real hatred for the senior minister because every time he preached, the senior minister was changing the hymns that he chose for worship. How could this happen? Why did this man always do this? They called the bishop in to try and turn this situation around.

The other story is about a church where I served for over 29 years. When I first arrived there, there was a Board of Deacons and a Board of Deaconesses. The Deacons served communion. The Deaconesses washed the dishes and poured and took care of the preparations for communion. They were quite clear that no woman should serve communion and that the men should not have to wash the dishes. You could imagine that this would cause some difficulty.

In all of these stories that I started for you, there comes this moment when things change. I would suggest to you that, on the fourth of July in 1776, there was such a moment in colonial America.

John Adams, who helped write the Declaration of Independence, thought actually that the date we would celebrate was July 2 because that was the day when it was first approved on its first reading, but you know they had to take some things out and put some other things in. The final reading was not until the fourth of July. John Adams said about this day that this was the most momentous day in this nation's history. This was the day that would be celebrated for hundreds of years. People would have parades and they would have fireworks, and they would have gatherings and some moments of silence or solemn reflection of what all this means, this new birth of freedom.

George Washington thought that this wasn't anything unusual, this Declaration of Independence. It was simply putting down in one language what everyone had known in their hearts before, but it was important to finally put it in writing and to say that it is time to have a break. This was the day when things changed.

The moment that changes in this story about Jesus in Mark's Gospel is when Jesus says, "I cannot serve two masters. I cannot serve Beelzebub, the devil, and God at the same time". Then there is that passage that has become important to us in this nation when He said "A house divided against itself cannot stand". There are some moments when you think of structures and churches. When the bishop finally came between the minister and the associate minister and sat down with them and asked the associate to finally say after two years what it was that was bothering him, he said "Well, the senior minister always changes the hymns that I pick, and it's making me angry and furious". The bishop

turned to the senior minister, and she said “What are you talking about? I have never changed any hymns that you’ve chosen. I don’t understand.” They started to communicate. It was a wonderful moment when things began to change.

There were eight deacons and eight deaconesses, and none of the eight men wanted to be the Chairman of the Board of Deacons one year—thanks be to God! Shirley Whitaker, who was the wife of the former president at one of our seminaries of the United Church of Christ, spoke up and said “I’ll tell you what. I’ll be head of both the deacons and the deaconesses, and the men had already said they wouldn’t do it, so they said “Well, okay”, and from that moment on it became The Diaconate, and finally it became the Board of Deacons—men and women together.

After those moments, something surprising happens, and a change takes over. Something new is afoot. With the writing of the Declaration of Independence, there was a power that focused itself in this new nation. George Washington had it read to all of the army units on the 9th of July right after that in New York City on the Bowling Green in New York City. There was a statue of King George on his horse. Some of the army men got ropes, and they put them around the statue of King George III and they pulled that statue down, and they chopped that metal apart. They were going to use that as bullets to fight off these British soldiers. George Washington had a word for them. He said “This should never happen again. I expect all of you to act with dignity and respect for those against who we fight. I expect you to act like Christian men as we seek our freedom, for if you do not, you are no greater than they”. What a change it made.

Now, in the story of Jesus, we are given to understand by Mark’s Gospel that the people knew and they understood that Jesus was not the devil but a kind, compassionate man who seemed to have their interests at heart, who dealt with their diseases, and who loved them. He was the one who God had chosen and who brought the faith in Jesus Christ in part to us.

In the story of the minister and the associate, the bishop did some investigating, and he discovered that the secretary and the organist had been colluding together and changing the hymns of the associate minister because they thought that the associate minister didn’t know what he was doing. Well, there was some follow up to that part, but the minister and the associate began to be friends, and there was this new birth of creativity, camaraderie and good feeling that began to grow.

Regarding the deacons in that church where I served, once they began to all be together, there was a new burst of creativity, and they didn’t worry so much just about communion. They started caring about the people in the congregation. They started having these creative juices flowing. They took on more tasks. They worked together, and men actually washed dishes for a while. Structure changes things.

In the 44th Psalm that Jeanne also read to you, the opening lines of the Psalm say, Lord, we celebrate what you have done in our past. We know that you have been the one who led us out of bondage in Egypt. You were the one who has given us victory in battles over and over again. Then, I asked Jean to stop at that point because the rest of the Psalm turns into whining because it starts to say, well, you did all that before. Now you are not doing that for us. Lord, where have you gone? We have tried to be faithful and you are not doing anything for us. We are still defeated in battle and our nation is going up in smoke. What is happening and what can you do? You haven’t been on our side. It’s a funny thing when you think about the Fourth of July and the men who served with George Washington as Commander in Chief. We call them patriots. The British call them rebels. The British thought they were revolutionaries and wanted them to be shot because they were rebelling against their country. It depends on how you look at it.

In our own American Civil War, at his second inaugural, Abraham Lincoln recognized that both sides believed that God was on their side, and both prayed to the same God, but Lincoln was smart enough to realize that God wasn’t really on either side, and the question was really: Are we on God’s side? Are we following the ways and pathways that God has taught us? “A house divided against itself

cannot stand.” Lincoln said that long before the Civil War. I believe that this nation will either be all slaves or all free.

Martin Luther King, Jr. realized the same thing when he tried to say to the nation, “We can’t live in a segregated society. We can’t have one society of black and one society of white. We must be one nation.”

So, this Fourth of July weekend, we celebrate the Declaration of Independence. Remember that our forefathers and foremothers fought against the idea of a divine right of kings to rule over us. Let’s think for a moment about who has a divine right. Is there a divine right? Well, the “KKK”, when it was active throughout the whole country, believed that they had a divine right, and that they were quite clear that Jews, blacks and Catholics weren’t welcome. Is there a divine right that says men should serve communion and women should not? Is there a divine right that says whether you are able to be in the upper echelons of society is determined by whether or not you have a certain color of skin, or whether or not you have achieved a certain age, or whether or not you are of a certain sexual orientation?

I believe that the Declaration of Independence, which is taken from the Christian principles of our forefathers and foremothers, says that “All men are created equal”, and if they had only talked to their wives, they would have realized they should have said “All people are created equal”. We believe that is what it is. It doesn’t have parentheses after it that says “except for”. It is “All are created equal”. Christ comes to us and I believe He says to us that you are all welcome here...young and old, full head of hair or hair challenged, and no matter the color of your skin. None of that matters. It is only that we are all children of God. We are all...all of us...precious in God’s sight, and we are all welcome at the table of our Lord. Amen.