

“A Republic . . . Can We Keep It” A Sermon based on Isaiah 61:1-2a;8-9; Galatians 5:1;4-5; and Luke 4:16-21 delivered on July 5, 2026 for Independence Weekend at the Village Park with the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs.

I think it is pretty safe for me to say, in this particular group, that we all grew up placing our hands over our hearts and reciting the “Pledge of Allegiance” to the flag each morning to begin our school day. The closing hymn that Bruce Brooks wrote to the tune of Auld Lang Syne uses those familiar words in various ways to remind us of those foundational ideas.

On this 250th Birthday of our nation, the words feel comforting to us, like an old friend. You remember them, don’t you? The pledge starts out with these words, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of and to the Republic for which it stands.” The pledge became so familiar by repetition, that I know I never really thought about our country as a Republic. We talked a lot about democracy in school but not so much about our Republic “for which our flag stands!” Webster’s defines a Republic as “*a state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, and which has an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch.*” We are vaguely aware that our forefathers and foremothers were fighting for freedom from the King of England and that monarchy, but our history lessons often stopped there.

The Declaration of Independence, formally the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America is the founding document of the United States. On July 4, 1776, it was adopted unanimously by the Second Continental Congress, who were convened at Pennsylvania State House, later renamed Independence Hall, in the colonial city of Philadelphia, and so we mark our nation’s birthday from that date.

In the Preamble, we hear these powerful words: *“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, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”* As Christians we hear echoed here in our nation’s founding document the words that Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61 when teaching in his hometown synagogue:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

While not many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were practicing Christians, John and Abigail Adams were a brilliant exception, many of them were ¹*Deists*: Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, they all believed in the ideals of equality and justice and freedom.

Between 1776 and 1787, our country did not have a president. A loose connection under the Articles of Confederation guided things and much was left to the states to handle. In 1787 a Constitutional Convention was held, again in Philadelphia, to write the Constitution of the United States which was completed on September 17, 1787. That date has become a bit famous since Nancy Pelosi gave a speech to Congress in 2019 and loosely quoted Benjamin Franklin from that date.

As with quoting scripture, it is really important that the context of any quote is kept in mind. Speaker Pelosi did not even attribute the quote to Benjamin Franklin and just attributed it to some “people.” Also the context,

on the steps of Independence Hall, seems unlikely. “A republic, if you can keep it” was Benjamin Franklin’s response to Elizabeth Willing Powel when asked whether the United States would be a republic or a monarchy.

The quote originates from September 17, 1787, the final day of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Elizabeth Willing Powel, a prominent Philadelphian, asked Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?” Franklin replied, “A republic, if you can keep it” as recorded in the journal of James McHenry, a Maryland delegate to the Convention. This exchange highlighted the conditional nature of self-governance: a republic is not guaranteed but depends on the vigilance and virtue of its citizens.

The fact that it was a woman who posed the question, one who could not be a delegate to the Convention but only an observer, is significant.

Despite her exclusion from the Pennsylvania State House, Powel was a force in Philadelphia social and political circles. The money, connections, and positions of authority held by the men in Powel’s family generated the basis of her power. Her father Charles Willing and brother Thomas Willing (1731-1821) were wealthy merchants, and they and her equally prosperous husband, Samuel Powel (1738-1793), were active in Philadelphia’s political and civic life. All three served as mayors of the city.

However, it was her own intelligence and political dexterity that made Elizabeth Powel a force to be reckoned with. She made her home a gathering place for the city’s political elite from the revolutionary period through George Washington’s presidency. Among the regulars at Powel’s dinners and parties were George and Martha Washington, with whom the Powels became close friends. Letters exchanged between the couples are in

the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress. One of these, from Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, dates from the third year of Washington's first term as president, a time when he was hoping he would be able to resign the presidency and go home to Mount Vernon.

Elizabeth's political savvy drove her to understand that the infant Republic of the United States needed its first President to stay in office to provide continuity and strength to the new role. One-term would not be able to accomplish the cementing of the Republic as a stable government. In a letter to President Washington on November 17, 1792 she wrote that his political opponents would see his resignation as a sign that he believed the republican experiment had failed and, fearing for his own reputation, had "withdrawn from it that you might not be crushed under its Ruins." She pleaded with him: "For Gods sake do not yield . . . to a Love of Ease, Retirement, rural Pursuits. . . .May you, till the extremest (sic) old age, enjoy the pure Felicity of having employed your whole Faculties for the Prosperity of the People for whose Happiness you are responsible, for to you their Happiness is intrusted.(sic)"

Like Paul writing to the church he founded in Galatia to strengthen their resolve in their faith, Elizabeth Powel's words to our first President may have saved the infant Republic by providing him the strength to go on when he wanted to give up. It is very like when Paul writes to the Galatians:

¹It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. . . .⁴ You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope."

Outside forces and fatigue of faith had been taking their toll on the Galatian church and Paul's words reminded them of their central maxim "Freedom in Christ" which strengthened their resolve.

President Washington after being a General during a brutal war, contributing to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the pressure brought to bear on him to be President of the new Republic was bone tired and just wanted to go home, and yet, he continued to serve. Paul had to be tired too, but he just kept on traveling, founding churches and writing letters of encouragement to them.

Our questions here today are no different from the ones our founding parents and Christ's early apostles faced. As to our nation, we are governed by "A Republic, if we can keep it." Less than a century after its founding, our republic survived a brutal and heart-wrenching Civil War that threatened to break it and since then a number of political movements have arisen that have served to divide us as a people. Our call is to remain a nation "of the people, by the people and for the people" and one that provides "liberty and justice for all." Our call as Christians is similar. We are called to embrace the freedom of Christ and "through the Spirit . . . await by faith the righteousness for which we hope." In short, we have a nation and a faith that are both precariously balanced on our ability to "keep it." Let us go from here and, as our U.S. Naval Commanders say, "make it so." Amen.

¹ **The Influence of Deism**

Deism gained popularity in the 18th century, particularly among the educated elite in America. It rejected traditional Christian doctrines such as the divinity of Jesus and the authority of the Bible, advocating instead for a belief in a rational, benevolent Creator who could be understood through nature and reason. This philosophical stance influenced the Founding Fathers' views on governance, ethics, and the role of religion in public life.

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