

Celebrating the Gift...Humbly The Fourth of July

This isn't the Fourth of July, but it is the Sunday closest to it. It's not a holiday on our church calendar, but it is the key summer holiday on the American calendar. There were many parades and picnics and concerts and fireworks this past week, and we don't have to pretend we didn't notice as we do our weekly worship today. The Fourth of July is perhaps our foremost national holiday, Independence Day. It celebrates, as you well know, our nation's 1776 declaration of independence from Great Britain and the king, and so it becomes a kind of birthday for the United States of America, our 243rd.

Christians are not programmed to be rabid nationalists, though it's tempting when people keep telling us we are the world's lone superpower. It's tempting to assert our superiority over other nations, to speak of our nation in superlatives, to play down, and even put down, other nations, particularly our national enemies. But we have to know that other nations can play that game, too, and we have to know it is better and truer for us to assert not our pride but our humble and grateful friendship and our desire to live in peace and mutual respect for other peoples and their nations. And so, I suggest, it is well for us not to play the competitive game of nationalism on a day like this but to look for ways for all of us to get along harmoniously.

Not all Christians are Americans, and not all Americans are Christians. The church transcends any nation's boundaries, including ours, and the Psalmist says:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world and all its people (Psalm 24:1).

So as American Christians we are called to respect all people, including those who differ from us and even disagree with us, and to remember that the God of mercy and peace is their God, too. That is, our task as American Christians is to join God in his work and his hope for the peace and the prosperity of all the peoples of the earth.

The hymn-writer Lloyd Stone says it just right, I think (*ELW* 887:1,2):

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine.

But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
So hear my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

And here, not in hymn verse or poetry but in prose, is how one preacher, Brian McLaren, named by *Time* magazine as one of our most influential evangelicals, has expressed his own balanced appreciation of our country (and I easily associate myself with his sentiments):

I am a citizen of the United States and I love my country. I choke up sometimes when I sing about our land – the purple mountain's majesty and fruited plain, the spacious skies and amber waves of grain, from the Mojave to the Okefenokee to the oceans white with foam. I love the people, because they're my people, Democrats and Republicans and independents, northerners and midwesterners, southerners and northwesterners, urbanites and suburbanites and ruralites, folks of all skin tones and accents, recent immigrants, long-term settlers, and aboriginals. [These are all my people.]

I love our sports, our music, our jokes, our cooking, our holidays. There's so much to love. But there's something I'm not so fond of. The thing I don't love is hard to name, hard to describe. It's a flaw in our national character, I think, or maybe not a flaw as much as an immaturity, like an adolescent chip on our shoulder, something we need to grow out of.

You could call it arrogance, a sense of exceptionalism, superiority, and pride.

And so he goes on to talk about this flaw and to wonder where it comes from. He wonders if it comes from wanting to celebrate our successes but not to face our failures and mistakes, such as the slavery that has been called our country's "original sin" and the racism and white supremacy that persist among us to this day...or the way we have treated our Native American brothers and sisters, how we have "wounded" them and

taken away their land. We do have flaws to go with our successes, and in one of our national songs we do indeed ask God to “mend our every flaw.” That is a good prayer, and it is needed still today.

McLaren goes on to say: There is a tension here, *particularly* for Christians. We are Christians, and we are Americans, and sometimes we seem to think they are synonymous, but it isn't so. We are “citizens of a rich, well-armed, powerful Western nation,” and we are followers of “a poor, nonviolent peasant from the Middle East” (whose name is Jesus). It's a tension we ought not overlook or seek to ignore. It is important for American Christians not to confuse our nation with the kingdom of God or the American way of life with the Christian way of life. It is important for us not to equate our national interest with God's will. Abraham Lincoln warned against thinking that God is on *our* side in all our battles and struggles with our enemies. We love our country – it is our home. Nothing wrong with that. God has blessed us here, and God is still blessing us here. But we don't need to be insufferable and disrespectful and arrogant in the ways we say it and do it. Those are not the virtues that we learned here last Sunday, when we asked what it takes to be a follower of Jesus today. Those are not the fruits of the Spirit that Jesus wants to grow in us. Humility and kindness are – joy and love and peace are. I don't need to demean or demonize your family in order to love mine. We don't need to demean or demonize other nations in order to love ours.

I don't need to remind you how deeply divided politically we are today, but it is in that context that I would plead for us all to make ourselves part of the solution and not part of the problem. Christians have pertinent and powerful resources for working out differences and disagreements. Christians have from Jesus every inducement needed to exercise compassion for the people hurting badly today – at our southern border and in Colombia and Venezuela, in Yemen and Myanmar and Afghanistan and many other places around the world, as well as in our own neighborhoods. That inducement to active compassion comes from the one who gives his life for us and who says in his own color-blind way, As you do it to one of the least of these, you do it to me (Matthew 25:40), and who urges us to learn to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31) ...and even to learn to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-45). Anyone can love those who love them, says Jesus, but you can do better than that. And next Sunday he will tell us again the classic story about that, the parable of the good Samaritan.

So I'm glad for the Fourth of July. I'm glad for our country, the United States of America, our home. I love to sing, “As he died to make people holy, let us live to make people free” and “America, America, God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.” We celebrate a great gift on this national holiday, and it's appropriate that we do it with gratitude and with humility, if indeed we wish to do it in the name of our merciful and peaceful God, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the God of us all.

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