

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all the world, we live in a world where it is often easy to use words and forget action, we seek to be faithful. We recognize this world that praises excess, that loves flourishing phrases without doing anything to back it up, and we seek to preach a different Gospel. We preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ that lifts up love while loving the other, that preaches word and action. In a world that lifts up the easy path, remind us consistently, God, that your path is a difficult but rewarding one.

This week, God, we give thanks that we live in a land of plenty, and that we here have our needs mostly taken care of. You are the God of all people, and you seek the benefit of all people. Guide us, God, not to fall into cheap faith or cheap patriotism, where we rely on words without action, when we rely on thankfulness without working to make ourselves and our land the very best it can be for all people. Let us not preach this as a Christian nation in words, but guide us to act so that we could be known as a Christian nation by our love and our gracious action. Lead us to be a symbol of talking the talk and walking the walk. May we be a people and a nation that follows the difficult but rewarding path of faithful citizenship that honors each other and our Gracious God. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of Liberty and Freedom, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to live and pray...

SERMON

It's time for the 4th of July, my dear friends. Time for cookouts, baseball, and some good old-fashioned relaxation. More notably, this week we celebrate the concepts of freedom and the United States of America. It will be a time of grand celebration and patriotic pageantry. Unfortunately, like anything in life, our celebrations often come while

missing something. There tends to be a focus on celebration without the responsibility of growth and change. These celebrations need to recognize that there is always work to be done. The words “patriot,” “citizen,” and “Christian” in our world today have become much more about what we say than what we do. They can become much more destructive to the neighbor than constructive, especially when we disagree. It’s easy to lose sight of what “freedom” means. While many people throughout our history have died to protect freedoms, “freedom” has gone from a noble concept to a self-centered tool to insult others and focus on how freedoms help them instead of those less privileged.

We are here because we are Christians and we are Americans. We believe that these two things define us, and we cannot help but believe that our Christianity informs our citizenship. True patriotism, true citizenship, and true Christianity are about so much more than our culture’s cheap definitions. We get the basic overview of faithfulness in all these things from the Prophet Micah: What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? First of all, faithful citizenship is about living a life of words and actions. That is how we do justice. Secondly, true citizenship is about growing in relationship. That is how we love kindness. Finally, faithful citizenship is about focusing on humility and growth toward being the best people we can be. That is how we walk humbly with our God.

There’s an old phrase: “Well-done is better than well-said.” We as pastors are always required to back up what we say; otherwise, we lose all credibility. If you see someone who doesn’t always live up to what they say or do the opposite, they become hypocrites. Because of this, we are people who believe in action more than a speech. In everything, there is a faithful middle road between two extremes. As Christians, we show

we love God in words and in deeds; we can pray and read scripture as a jumping point to acting our faith in our actions. The same mentality holds sway for how we act out our love for our country: we can honor this country in words, but we must seek that it becomes the very best land it can be through our actions. We can be thankful that we live the way we do while we make it a land where as many people as possible can live to the fullest. We can talk the talk, just as long as we walk the walk.

Patriotism in today's culture is one of those words thrown around without much thought. I struggle with the portrayal of patriotism in only words or simple deeds. Just to say, "God bless America," slap a bumper sticker on the back of your car, or put out a quick status update on Facebook can make anyone a patriot in our culture. There's a word for that: slack-tivism. It means saying you believe something without doing any real work to back it up. I think the best definition for the patriot is from our nation's founding fathers. If we look at them in their context, just as we should do with scripture and Jesus, we see that they were pushing back against a power that was just fine with the status quo. They were pushing back against a power that didn't mind treading over the oppressed and the marginalized. These old patriots were seeking to define and refine a country for the betterment of all people. They used the words to define their deeds. I believe we have lost the piece of patriotism that consistently fights for the betterment of all people. Patriotism in that age was not just about words but backing those words up with action. That action is not just about what benefits me but what benefits all my brothers and sisters across the land. That's not only patriotic, taking pride in what it means to be a citizen of this nation, but it follows what it means to be a Christian as well. Patriotism can be lazy in our culture; it's time for it to do less talking, put on its work boots and get to work to honor all people.

That's what we're called to by our founding fathers and Jesus Christ. When we are focused on doing the work of loving and serving all people – in this country and beyond – we focus on the work of true patriotism and what it means to do justice in Micah's sentiment

A very important part of faithful citizenship is the focus on relationship.

Relationship seeks to be with the other to love and help the other become the very best he or she can be. The very foundation of Christianity and the nature of God is relationship!

God is three in one: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, who guides us to live relationship as God does. It is impossible to be a Christian by one's self, and we do not exist on an island in this country as well. That is why we are here today; we are here to be community. Most of us are here because we have found relationship here through our friends and our family.

The church is strong when it focuses on how we love each other and work for each other's benefit.

True patriotism requires relationship as well. Unfortunately, we across this land often focus on what separates us in our politics. I'm tired of people that love being called a patriot quick to dehumanize their opponents just because they don't agree. The rhetoric of "I believe in this interpretation, and if you don't you aren't American," is not a path to relationship. Republicans, Democrats, or Christians, we all suffer the same injustice.

Relationship instead requires we sit at the table and legitimately discuss how we do our best to care about each other, to care about our nation, to care about our work as a people.

Our story from the Gospel of Luke tells the story of a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee is supposedly one who knows all and sees all, an expert when it comes to the religious life. On the other hand, we have a tax collector, someone who is supposedly hard to love even if you are his spouse. The Pharisee prays the prayer of "Thank you God, for I

do all these great things and I'm not like one of those scumbag tax collectors over there. I am so grateful because I am so good." The Pharisee is supposed to be the example for all the people to follow, but he's just sitting back and saying how good he is and how bad the other person is. Doesn't seem like someone you want to hang around with, now does it? Obviously, he's not a faithful example of crafting relationship, working to be with and serve the other. On the other hand, we have the tax collector who is almost crying out for relationship. While this story doesn't show exactly what it means to foster good relationship, it definitely shows what it doesn't mean to "love kindness" toward our neighbors, especially those who are considered below our social standing.

Relationship, my friends, should be the point of freedom. As Christians, we are taught that we are faithful as long as we are honoring the neighbor and God as ourselves. Why should our freedoms be any less? In the spirit of the founding fathers, the focus of freedom should be the betterment of our brothers and sisters. Freedom should live into the spirit of Jesus, where we seek to free our brothers and sisters from the many forms of bondage that we struggle with in today's life. If you haven't seen it, I suggest a good example of this is the 1989 movie *Glory*, about the first black regiment in the Civil War. This is freedom and relationship at work: continually pushing against bondage by society, by old ideas. Relationship builds the other up; our freedom should be one of the first tools to that cause.

Finally, to be a faithful citizen is to recognize that we are never a complete product. To be on this earth means that we are consistently growing, consistently learning, consistently seeking what it means to follow the path of Jesus Christ the Lord. Last week, we discussed what it means to be and to live with the Tree of Life. The tree is an excellent

example of what it means to be alive. Throughout its living days, it releases old branches and leaves in order that it may grow new ones. The tree always expands its roots to find newer and deeper food. The tree is alive because it has to grow to live. A tree only stops changing when it dies. We, as citizens and Christians, must realize the same thing: we must keep growing because we are still living.

The Pharisee gives the haughty prayer of how great he is. He already seems to declare that he is the final product. Apparently, he cannot get any better, which automatically shows he is wrong. At the same time, the tax collector legitimates the idea that he is far from perfect and that he needs help to become the very best he can be. Jesus lauds the tax collector's prayer. While we recognize our limitations, we are called toward positivity and growth. The tax collector's prayer is just the beginning, not the ending. In the same way, we as Americans must recognize that we can sin, but that we are called not to focus on that but to use that toward being a better country and group of citizens. In that way, we work on walking humbly with our God as learners, not as those who have it all together.

When it all comes down to it, I'm get tired of the debate if America is a Christian nation. I don't care, because the real question is if we are living it. As a country, are we doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God? If we are, then it doesn't matter whether we are called a Christian nation or not. We'll just know it. I'm proud to live in this country, and I just hope that we can seek to live as best as we can. This holiday should be not about how great America is but how we are continually seeking to make America great. It's about thanking a veteran AND thinking about how we live in this country has constant meaning for all God's people. Giving our thanks is just as much a call

to action as it is sentiment. We must make sure that the mission of those who have lived and died for the country's well-being is an ongoing legacy for true freedom that continues to grow and flourish for all people. Freedom is true when it looks at how I can live for you instead of what you must do for my benefit. On this Independence Day and beyond, let us seek what it means to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, as Christian People and as American People. We seek this because God cares more about "Well done!" than "Well said!" Amen and Amen.