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Date: July 15, 2012
Sermon Title: God's Message for Nations and Rulers
Scripture: Various
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Scripture Litany God's Message for Nations and Rulers

Leader: Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless or the widows. (*Isaiah 1:23*)

People: Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless, or the widow. Then all the people shall say 'Amen.' (*Deuteronomy 27:19*)

Leader: Therefore, you rulers, be wise. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. (*Psalms 2:10-11*)

People: Love and faithfulness keep a ruler safe; through love his throne is made secure. (Proverbs 20:28. By justice a ruler gives a country stability. (Proverbs 29:4)

Leader: Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people. (*Exodus 22:28*) Do not revile the ruler even in your thoughts, or curse the rich ... because a bird may report what you say. (*Ecclesiastes 10:20*).

People: Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13:1)

Leader: Show proper respect to everyone: Love the fellowship of believers, fear God, honor the ruler. (*1 Peter 2:17*)

People: Righteousness exalts a nation. (Proverbs 14:34)

Leader: Do not lose heart or be afraid when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next. (*Jeremiah 51:46*)

Together: If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked way, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Do you remember the first time you walked into a voting booth to vote? Or when you brought one of your kids or grandkids along? An introduction to citizenship, wasn't it? We vote. We pay our taxes. We defend the country. We do what we can to make it a good place. We strive to make the country live up to its ideals and to make the rulers fulfill their responsibilities. That's good citizenship.

Last Sunday I preached a sermon with a rather lofty title, "God's Message for America." The sermon was grounded in Scripture, making three key points:

1. This is a great country.
2. God has a right to expect a lot from us.
3. Stop whining.

We mostly looked at what God thinks of rulers and nations. Today, citizens. What does God expect of citizens? If you look at that litany of verses — the same one we used last Sunday — there is a good advice in there. And we can neatly summarize it:

1. Forget the rulers; they never amount to much anyway.
2. Concentrate on love, justice, and faithfulness.
3. Don't get caught up in all the negativity.
4. Do the right thing.

That's based on that wonderful verse from Proverbs, "Righteousness exalts a nation." We might popularize that with a more modern slogan, "Great nations do good things." And we might go a step further and say, "Great citizens make sure a great nation does good things."

Many years ago I was asked to consider becoming pastor of an exciting church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I'll never forget something the committee members said to me in the opening interview: "We'll never question why you did something, but we might question why you didn't." *We'll never question why you did something, but we might question why you didn't.* They wanted to make sure that I would be aggressive, proactive in making sure that the church was doing the right thing. They wanted me looking for ways for the church to be righteous, to be right. That's a good way to approach citizenship.

On Friday morning I heard a report on NPR about something called "Fan Fiction." Suppose you have a novel you really loved, or a movie, or a Broadway show. Evidently, you can go online, and there are people who carry the story forward. Professionally, this has already been done with

prequels and sequels. But now it's being done by just folks, the fans, the people, you and me. Pretty cool.

Well, America is a story, a fascinating story, from the settling of Jamestown and the Pilgrims all the way to 2012. It's quite a story. But suppose we don't want it to end. Suppose we want the story of America to go on. What would we add? What would we contribute? That's the role of citizens. We add to the story.

The Bible really does have a love-hate relationship with rulers. Even our little litany is filled with contradictions. The prophet Isaiah writes, "Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they don't defend the weak." (Isaiah 1:23) Yet, St. Paul turns around and declares, "Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. The government authorities that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13:1) Paul's whole argument in Romans is troubling. About the ruling authorities, Paul says, "He is God's servant, an agent of wrath [against] the wrongdoer. Rulers hold no terror for those who do right." (Romans 13:3-4)

The Old Testament is full of God's disdain for rulers, from one end of the spectrum to the other. Now here's St. Paul saying, "All these guys over you? They are God's team, put in place to control you. So keep your head down, your mouth shut, your nose clean, and pay your taxes, you'll be fine."

If you're like me, you're sitting there right now compiling your own list of lousy leaders and trying to figure out if God really put them in power. Nero. Qaddafi. Mao. Stalin. Hitler. Idi Amin. Saddam Hussein. The child-abusing mayor of Waterbury. The bribe-taking governor of Illinois. God put them in power?

There are several verses in the Bible I reject. I don't believe in hitting kids with a stick. I don't believe in slaughtering civilians. I don't believe women should be kept silent in the church. And I don't believe we should submit to every government official willy-nilly. One of my complaints with the verse is that it gets used about every eight years. Whenever the person I like and the party I like are in power, I get to say to all the whiners, "Submit to the government authorities. They've been put there by God. If you're good, you have nothing to complain about."

Then a few years later, the other party is in power, the one I didn't vote for, and now I start to whine, and then the Bible-thumpers say, "You need to submit to the government. They've been put in power by God. They're God's servants. You have no right to complain." And so on and so on, back and

forth, depending on who is in power and who is out! But good citizenship ought to outlast elections. Good citizenship is what we should do day in and day out.

One of my favorite verses from the litany is Psalm 2: "Therefore, rulers, be wise. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling." Quite a combination. A ruler should be wise and fearful, joyful and trembling. That's all attitude, isn't it? Spirit! The "feel" of leadership.

The particulars of leadership are pretty constant: love, faithfulness, justice, the Book of Proverbs says, those are the marks of good leaders. Look after those who have no one to look after them. The Bible uses "widows and orphans" as the epitome of the poorest of the poor, the weakest segment of society, the most vulnerable, the most at risk. They had nobody. No advocate. No champion. So God expected Israel to stand by their sides. The government. The ruler. The machinery of state. Powered by the values of religion. They were to be the champions of the poor. But to do it, to do it successfully, to do it long term, they needed, we need, the right spirit.

So back to Psalm 10: "Be wise, fearful, joyful, and trembling." Let's link that to another verse from our litany, 1 Peter 2:17, "Show proper respect to everyone. Love the fellowship of believers. Fear God. Honor the rulers." Respect. Love. Fear. And honor. Interesting words in those two verses, including a surprising use of "fear and trembling." First of all, when the Bible talks about "fearing" God. It means "awe." The Bible actually says, "Our God is an awesome God!" Awe-some, awe-ful, awe-inspiring. The idea of God, the presence of God, the work of God, the stuff God wants us to do, should fill us with awe. We should tremble at the idea of it, at the reality of it. Doing the righteous thing. Being a good citizen. Serving God should shake us to the core.

At Bible Study, we looked at the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. You know the story. Moses had escaped from Egypt after killing an Egyptian. The guy who had once been a prince is now a shepherd working for his father-in-law. And then he sees a "burning bush," a bush that appears to be on fire, yet never is consumed. Intrigued, Moses goes to the tree, and the first thing God says to him is, "Take off your shoes. You are standing in holy ground." (Exodus 3:5). In other words, "This is big, this is important, get serious, get real, a little awe, a little sweat is in order!" That's a good thing to have. We ought to have the view that whatever we are doing is important, is worth our best, is worth a little trembling.

Let me give you a fairly interesting example from the intersection of good citizenship and good church. You know we feed the hungry and homeless on the first Monday of every month; we've been doing it for 13 or 14 years. No big deal, at least on the surface. We have a nice core group of people who help each month to shop, cook, serve, clean. And your church pledge, through our Mission Board, provides the funds. We might serve 50 to 90 people. Plus they take extra home to their neighbors. But in the grand scheme of things, how important is it? Especially when it's not convenient.

We had a good test of that on July 2. It was over 100° outside. Most everybody who normally helps was away, either in Appalachia or on vacation. Why not cancel? Maybe they have a backup plan? We've been doing it for 14 years, that's 168 straight months. So we skip one month ...

No, we didn't. Eleven people showed up to help; 21 different church families brought over baked goods on a moment's notice. Everyone got fed. Everyone got seconds. People took some home for others. Why? I think it was "fear and trembling." I think we understood the awesomeness of our task. Poor people. Hungry people. Lonely people. Some sick. Some discouraged. Some who seemed lost, afraid. Some in sorrow. Each trying hard to hang on. We knew that. We knew that good citizenship and good faith required us to think of that soup kitchen as "holy ground." So we didn't cancel. Our God is an awesome God. Our country is an awesome country. And our citizenship with both demands our awesome best.

One of the things I look forward to each June is high school and college graduation. And usually the big newspapers do a good job of summarizing the graduation speakers, the famous and not so famous. *The Boston Globe*, for example, highlighted the 39 valedictorians of Boston's public high schools. Here are some quotes of what they think:

"Go after your dreams ...
Be an example for others ...
Stay true to yourself ...
Work hard ...
Do something unique ...
Volunteer...
Stay focused ...
Ask for help ...
Try your best ...
Stay motivated ...
Find something you're passionate about ..."

(*The Boston Globe* 10 June 2012:B4 Print)

The New York Times covered some college graduation speakers, and there was some good stuff there, too, much of it focused on being a good citizen.

Here's Robert Gates, former defense secretary, and Cory Booker, Mayor of Newark, and the author Michael Lewis at Princeton, sounding a common theme: "The obligations of citizenship in any democracy are considerable, but they are even more profound [now] ... [so] consider spending at least part of your life in public service." (Gates)

"Recognize that if you have had success, you have also had luck, and with luck comes obligation. You owe a debt, and not just to your gods. You owe a debt to the unlucky." (Lewis)

"Go out there and swear to this world your oath, not with your words, but with what you do. Not with your hand over your heart, but with your hand outstretched to a world that desperately needs your hand, your help, your insights, your creativity, your honor, your courage. It needs you." (Booker)

My favorite was Condoleezza Rice, our former secretary of state. Remember the Boston high school valedictorian who said, "Find something you're passionate about"? Rice said the same thing. "Find and follow your passion ... something you really believe is a unique calling to you, something that you can't live without ... you have been taught to serve those who are less fortunate. And, yes, it will help them, but it will help you more ... In fact, you will ask ... 'Why have I been given so much?'"

And an actor named Peter Dinklage really nailed it: "Don't bother telling the world you are ready. Show it. Do it. What did Beckett say? 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'" (Pérez-Peña, Richard. "Familiar Faces Offering Advice, Idealism and Humor." *The New York Times* 17 June 2012: 21. Print.)

Don't you like that? You keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Even your failures get better.

In fact, I like all these quotes. The first batch from a bunch of 17- and 18-year-old inner-city kids just starting out in life. The second batch are folks who have already made it in life, but they were all on the same page. Republican and Democrat. Young and old. Immigrant and native born.

Life is worth living. Life is worth making a difference. Life is worth your best. That's good citizenship. That's good religion.