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Sermon Title: American As Apple Pie And Baseball
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Our Litany for America

Deacon: "Get thee to a far country," God said to Abraham. And they made a covenant, each to be a blessing to the other.

People: Our ancestors, or even we ourselves, left some place far away to come to this far country. This was our Promised Land, our Providence, our new Canaan.

Deacon: Joshua said to Israel as they came to the Promised Land, "Choose this day whom thou shalt serve. As for me and my family, we shall serve the Lord."

People: Dare we make the same choice? With flag held high and patriot's fervor, here in the Promised Land, dare we choose to serve God above all? We dare.

Deacon: "If my people will humble themselves and pray, and seek me, and turn from wickedness, I will hear them and heal their land" (Chronicles 7:14)

All: Holy God, we do call upon your name in times of joy and difficulty. We call upon your name to guide us, protect us, use us. Heal us from all that divides us, from all that wounds us. Take us at our best, and our worst, and make us better.

Let me begin with an email I got this week, an excerpt from "Bill Bennett's *The American Patriot's Daily Almanac: Daily Readings on America*, a collection of little slices of American history. This one is about Benjamin Franklin.

"In the summer of 1787, the Constitutional Convention met at Independence Hall in Philadelphia to decide how to set up a new government. At times the arguments grew bitter, and tempers flared in the summer heat. Some delegates verged on quitting . . . Some have called this period the "critical juncture" in the Convention. The country was brand-new, and already it looked as though it might fall apart.

"On June 28, 1787, 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin, the oldest delegate, rose from his seat and made a simple but profound suggestion: they should pray for guidance. He reminded the others that the Continental Congress had asked for divine aid at the start of the Revolutionary War.

"Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered,' he said. 'And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? Or do we imagine that we no longer need his assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proof I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?'

"The delegates did not follow Franklin's suggestion to begin each session with prayer . . . But his words helped calm the Convention, which soon began to make progress, and that answered Franklin's fervent prayer."

America. Born in prayer. *Sort of*. A Christian nation. *Sort of*. Founded on religious freedom. *Sort of*. And still trying to figure out what to do with all three.

We can't figure out what to do with God in this country. We can't figure out what to do with religion in this country. In a country founded on diversity and differences, we can't figure out what to do with all our diversity and differences in this country. Benjamin Franklin would advise us to polish, to conjure, to pray . . . To invite that friend, which is what he calls God, invite that friend into the discussion, since that friend was here from the beginning.

America. The United States of America. What a strange, wondrous, thinking-outside-the-box, mix-and-match, patchwork quilt of the country. Most other countries had some sense of shape, of history, of territory, of culture; some sort of common bond—maybe language, maybe place, maybe religion; something that said this is what we are, and you are *not*.

Sure, boundaries shifted here and there. One place conquers another place. Empires start, expand, fade, come to an end. And certainly there are nations that are arbitrary, imposed, cobbled together. By hook or by crook, there are

196 nations today, each with a flag and a national anthem, and often, our own birth narrative. Some are sacred or mythical or heroic.

We have the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock, meeting with friendly natives who see them through a harsh winter. And then we have George Washington, chopping down the cherry tree and refusing to lie about it. And Ben Franklin, capturing lightning, literally. And our soldiers, shivering at Valley Forge, daring to cross the Delaware, embracing winter. And Nathan Hale, regretting that he had but one life to give for his country. And everyday heroes at Bunker Hill, Lexington, and Concord. And the "shot heard round the world."

So *now* we can say, "Presto! Here is America!" But of course it wasn't "Presto!" It was a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. A lot. A lot of sacrifice, a lot of suffering, a lot of trial and error. It's good to remember our roots.

Our little July Fourth Scripture Litany begins with an ancient story of nation-building, the story of God telling Abraham to build Israel from scratch. Start with nothing and nowhere and nobody, and build. Of course, that's not entirely true, is it? There is always something and somebody and somewhere, and that complicates things. Like when the Israelites finally got to Canaan, the Promised Land, there were folks already there, with cities and cultures and gods. And they probably had their own flag and national anthem.

And so here we are 3,000 years later, still trying to sort it out. How many wars and holocausts and Camp Davids and Oslos and Intifadas and Jared Kushners and George Mitchells, and we're still stuck in the past? And the same with us. We Pilgrims came to Cape Cod. We Catholics came to Maryland. We Quakers came to Pennsylvania. We Dutch came to New York. And we built a NEW Canaan and a NEW England and a Providence, as though we all arrived at the Promised Land. But, of course, we bumped into folks already here, and we bumped into one another, and we bumped into our own ancient histories and ancient hatreds. But, by golly, we built a nation. And we built it a bit the way Abraham did.

The central idea for Abraham is called the "Covenant." God and Abraham made a covenant, a two-way promise, a deal. Fairly simple. God told Abraham, "Get thee to a far country. Start over someplace fresh. You stick with me, I'll stick with you. We'll do this together. Let's not forget each other. Don't ignore each other. Let's count on each other."

Israel was the grand experiment of its time. Three thousand years later, America was—is—the grand experiment of our time. We all got here from some "far country," some dragged and kicking, some fleeing, some sent, some dreaming. What unites us—or used to—is that sense of Covenant. Some idea

that we are in this together, building something, with a force greater than ourselves directing it all. What Ben Franklin called "that powerful friend."

I titled this sermon "American As Apple Pie And Baseball." We often hear, "There is nothing as American as apple pie and baseball." They hark back to a simpler time, the "good old days," when things were purer, done right, more fun. Right? And I get that.

A couple of summers ago I was up in Hartford to visit a Church member in the hospital, and after my visit, I decided to walk through historic Bushnell Park. To my amazement, I came across an old-time baseball game, played as it was in the 1870s. Old-time bats and balls, old-time rules, old-time feel. Before steroids, before ESPN, before big stadiums, before buying and selling autographs, it was just baseball, pure and simple, a true pastime. Like my childhood, playing "sandlot ball," pick-up games with my friends on an empty lot. When we say, "as American as baseball," that's the baseball we're remembering.

And when it comes to pie, well, remember my 20th-anniversary celebration a few weeks ago? What a morning! So much love, so much fun, so much inspiration, great music, wonderful speeches. Every day afterward for three weeks now, people talk about the reception, the homemade pie reception! Dozens and dozens of homemade pies, all sorts of crusts, all sorts of berries, all sorts of recipes.

Now, everybody knows I love raspberries, and everybody knows there's nothing more American than apple pie. But, lo and behold, Alida found me a slice of apple-raspberry pie (or was it raspberry-apple?)! Each taste took the other to new heights! They didn't cancel each other out. They turned something already excellent, already exceptional, already perfect, almost sacred, into a wonderful surprise. Who knew you could improve on perfection?

What I'm suggesting is that, yes, we can appreciate the good old days, yesteryear, the way things used to be, the Founding Fathers, the Constitution. Nostalgia is fine. It's not always accurate, but it's fun. Nostalgia has its purpose, has its place, but no matter how you look, nostalgia is looking back. We need to love America today, not just yesterday.

The Waugaman family served our Church for many years before heading south. B.J. recently sent me this story: "A country minister was attending a men's breakfast. He asked one of the older farmers in attendance to say the opening prayer. The farmer began, 'Lord, I hate buttermilk.' The pastor opened one eye and wondered to himself where this was going. Then the farmer said, 'Lord, I hate lard.' The pastor was worried. But the farmer prayed on, 'And, Lord, you

know I don't care much for raw flour . . . but Lord, when you mix them all together and bake `em up, I do love those fresh biscuits. So, Lord, when things come up we don't like, when life is hard, or we just don't understand, help us to relax and wait . . . till you're done fixin', mixin', and bakin', and it'll be somethin' even better than biscuits."

That sounds like America. We've got a lot of people in this country. Some say they don't like buttermilk, some don't like the old kind of flour, some don't even know what lard is. They all claim to love an old-fashioned biscuit. "It's exceptional," they'll say. But they don't know or admit what goes into it. A lot of people are focused on the ingredients they don't like rather than the end product they love.

God's promise with Abraham, the Covenant, is fairly straightforward. We do our part; God does God's part. There's a certain quality of life God expects us to provide one another. In return there's a certain quality of life we expect God to provide to us, which is why we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," or the American version, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We take care of the essentials for one another. God takes care of the essentials for us. America is built on such ideals. That's why we have the *Commonwealth* of Massachusetts, the *Commonwealth* of Virginia, the *Mayflower Compact*. All the way to the *United States* of America.

In fact, we historic New England Congregationalists, those folks who started this little church in 1725, our organizing principle was—is—"the Covenant." We are not a go-it-alone, every-man-for-himself endeavor. We are an "all-hands-on-deck" endeavor, an "in-it-together" endeavor. A "look-out-for-one-another," "I've-got-your-back" endeavor.

In closing, I'll admit, it's not easy. The truth is, there isn't much that is easy. Being a Church. Starting a business. Having a career. Or a professional sports team. Or a Broadway show. Raising a family. Living a life. Running a charity. Learning something new. None of that is easy. But they're all worth the effort.

Here's my bottom-line belief about America. If we succeed, if we take all our diversity, all our differences, all our freedoms, all our advantages, all our religions, all our resources, and start seeing them as blessings, not burdens, we just might create something as American as, oh, say, raspberry-apple pie, or even buttermilk biscuits.

Now, let's stand and sing our beautiful patriotic hymn, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," No. 721

*My country, 'tis of thee,
sweet land of liberty,
of thee I sing;
land where my fathers died,
land of the pilgrims' pride,
from every mountainside
let freedom ring.*

*My native country, thee,
land of the noble free,
thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,
thy woods and templed hills;
my heart with rapture thrills,
like that above.*

*Let music swell the breeze,
and ring from all the trees
sweet freedom's song;
let mortal tongues awake;
let all that breathe partake;
let rocks their silence break,
the sound prolong.*

*Our fathers' God, to thee,
author of liberty,
to thee we sing;
long may our land be bright
with freedom's holy light;
protect us by thy might,
Great God, our King.*