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Date: July 4, 2021
Sermon: "Two Big Positives of July 4th"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

"Our Litany for America"

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

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

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

David: 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.

Alida: "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.

July 4th is an odd holiday. I've been a pastor in a town where it's the biggest day of the year. Before I came here, I was a pastor in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, up in the Berkshires. And people said there were two seasons in the Berkshires: winter and July 4th. And because July 4th was a whole season in itself, the town held a

major parade, shown live on PBS for many years. My Church up there even won a float award the year before I moved here.

Other places I've served, the towns emptied out for July 4th weekend. Nobody was around; I once preached a July 4th service for five people. Here, things changed when Church families would return from Vermont with stories of how some little towns, some little Churches had made their July 4th so special, and so I changed my thinking. Instead of July 4th being the Sunday most everybody is away, we started making it special for everybody still here.

Of course, it is true that a huge part of our Church is away, over 200 in Appalachia for our annual ASP Mission trip. But even their absence is quintessential America: they're down there, neighbor helping neighbor, almost like an old-fashioned barn raising. For the next week, 31 work crews, seven people in each crew, will be helping a family in need have a little bit better house, maybe a stronger foundation, maybe a sturdier roof, maybe a solid porch, maybe fewer leaks, maybe a better outlook. That's Americana right there. Just what July 4th should celebrate, right? America at its best, its basic, its noblest.

There are plenty of other times for hand-wringing, brow-furrowing, and finger-pointing. It's good to be reflective, self-critical. For me, that comes from my faith and my family. In our faith, the Bible tells us to examine ourselves, to not take Holy Communion "unworthily."

Jesus made Peter look hard at himself, Paul look hard at himself, Zacchaeus look at himself, the Samaritan woman look at herself. God made Adam and Eve look at themselves. Abraham, Moses, Esther rose to greatness only after looking at themselves carefully. Introspection: that's a good thing for a person and a nation. You don't get better by "thinking more highly of yourself than you ought," which is why the Bible says, precisely, "Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought." (Romans 12:3)

I grew up in a family *and* raised a family strong on self-criticism. We eat it for breakfast. I played a lot of sports, and our kids played a lot of sports. Every game was about two hours long. And every critique of the game was at least another two hours. And in the last two years, I've written two essays that look at America every which way, leaving no stone unturned. So we do introspection a lot. But sometimes it's good to kick back and see what's good, to say what's right.

I tried that recently. Our granddaughter has been living with us this year while doing Mount Holyoke College remotely. Which gives me the right to press her on her grades. So the other day I pressed her about her grades. I asked, "What were your grades this semester?" "Four A's and an A+," she said. Now, I can tell you throughout Rowe family history, the only acceptable response would be, "What

happened? Why only one A+?" But I broke with tradition and instead talked about the one A+, a total breach of the Rowe etiquette and parenting style, to dwell on the positive. To my surprise (and hers) I liked it! Maybe I'll do more of it.

Truth is the Bible dwells on the positive a lot. Sure, a lot of preachers like to do the hellfire and brimstone, the prophetic complaint against all that's wrong. But that's only in comparison to what's right. For example, the Bible famously says, "Thou shalt not kill." But out of the whole Bible, there are not that many verses against killing.

Because much of the Bible is about living. Emphasis is on the positive. Emphasis is on the good. Even when God gets mad at Israel, it's because God knows they're capable of so much more. After all, they are the "Promised Land," the "land flowing with milk and honey," a land where they're no longer slaves; it was a great land, it was a great place. It was full of potential. It was all you could ask for. That was God's perspective.

So I thought let's use our July 4th to focus on that perspective from the positive side. Growing up in the 50s and 60s, I'm a big folk music fan. And being from Queens, our local hero, our "Bob Dylan," was Dave Van Ronk, later known as "The Mayor of Greenwich Village." A big, bearded bear of a guy with a gravelly voice, one of his songs was "Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative, and Don't Hang Out with Mr. In Between." My essays sought to eliminate the negative, so let's accentuate the positive. Now, here are two more positives.

Number one, America has been the "Promised Land" for a lot of folks. From its inception, people have linked America to that Biblical image, a Promised Land "flowing with milk and honey," a place away from old-time horrors back in the old country, a place to build new dreams. Just like the ancient Israelites' escaping slavery in Egypt, escaping centuries of wandering stateless uncertainty, people flooded these shores, carried on by boats made of hope.

It's worth reminding ourselves when we think of people cramming Ellis Island or furtively crossing our southern border, what drove them there, what drives them there to flee, to leave kith and kin, land and village, tradition and culture?

My grandparents were Swedish and blonde Lutherans from a nation of Swedish blonde Lutherans. What drove them away? What drove them here? What was going on in that little town in southern Sweden that made them leave everything behind and come with nothing? This was the land of promise, of opportunity, where hope could be nurtured and a dream come true.

Even the 500,000 Africans stolen from their homes, broken from their families, carried in shackles on boats made of shame, once here, well, listen to their songs, hear their stories, read their books, see the best of America's promise take root.

They didn't reject America or Christianity but instead demanded the best from both. Notice the themes and doctrines and concepts that permeate African-American life, and notice their link to the best. Words like Zion, Jubilee, New Jerusalem, Canaan, Deliverance, Messiah, Hope. All the touchstones and springboards of still believing this can be the Promised Land . . . even while knowing the hard journey to get there.

Some of us are old enough to remember when the Yankees were really bad. Until they hired Buck Showalter as their manager. And he took them, step by step, from bad to lousy, lousy to poor, poor to mediocre, mediocre to good. I liked those years. I liked the goal, the expectation of excellence off on the horizon, the striving and sacrifice to get there, the hope that carried us along.

My other point today, my other "accentuate the positive" perspective point is I like the idea of America, which in one word is *freedom*. Nothing rouses the passions of Americans like freedom. Even our worst instincts have some connection to freedom.

Forget the hot political topics of the day, masks and vaccines, anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers. I lived in Massachusetts when they enacted seatbelt laws. Oh, my goodness! Those were divisive days! The anti-seatbelt crowd brought out the tri-corner hats, the "Don't tread on me" flags, that "Give me liberty or give me death" slogan, the "Don't take away my freedom to drive unencumbered and smash headfirst through the windshield if I want to" declaration of independence.

That silly example does show the challenge we all face as Americans. We revere freedom but sometimes don't know what to do with it. We wrestle with freedom vs. license, freedom and abuse of freedom, freedom and limits, if any.

The Bible is pro freedom. Freedom from sin, freedom from guilt, freedom from greed, avarice, lust.

Look at our Faith/Art today. These four magnificent paintings by Norman Rockwell: "The Four Freedoms." *Freedom of Speech. Freedom of Worship. Freedom from Want. Freedom from Fear.*

Franklin Roosevelt, who came up with those four freedoms, Norman Rockwell, who painted them, our Christian faith that elevated freedom, our nation that sought it step by step, our society that thrives on it—we all agree: freedom is crucial, vital, essential.

The best mantra I ever heard about freedom is "Your freedom ends at the tip of my nose." *Your freedom ends at the tip of my nose.* In other words, if the exercise of your freedom doesn't take away mine, go for it. You're not ruining my freedom, so I won't ruin yours. And the best way I can think to implement that is the age-old device to put yourself in someone else's shoes.

Take any category of human identity you can think of and put yourself in that category. What's the freedom you would want if you were in that category? If you were handicapped? If you were female? If you were unemployed? Black? Mentally ill? Stuck in a bad school? Stuck in a bad neighborhood? White, poor, rich, well, sick, or dying?

Let's take handicapped. Imagine you're in a wheelchair. A car accident. Disease. Immobilized. Paralyzed. What's freedom to you? Personally, directly, societally, legally? What's freedom to you?

After I was kicked out of Colgate University, I went to Hofstra University for two summers and one semester. I think they were the first place on earth to think through freedom for handicapped folks. How could a person in a wheelchair, lying on their back on a gurney (!) go to class, get from building to building, enter the dining hall, use a bathroom; free, free to be a full-blooded college student? Hofstra figured that out, and now all of America has figured it out, and nobody lost anything.

I watched the European soccer championship this week. It was a nail-biter between Sweden and Ukraine, and the announcer was bemoaning the over-cautious, boring game, each team seemingly afraid to go forward.

Here's what the announcer said repeatedly: "You can be afraid of consequences. Or you can be excited about consequences." *Afraid of consequences. Excited about consequences.* America keeps expanding freedom. Some people fear that. Me? I'm excited. (By the way, Sweden's caution lost them the game.)

What's freedom for a female? When my daughter was in middle school, starting to aspire, I heard this phrase: "All it takes for a man to become a feminist is to have a daughter who wants to do something." My daughter became a field hockey player. She wasn't a boy, and she wasn't a football player. As a result, her locker room was a lousy joke, and her team wasn't allowed to play night games under the lights on the big-boy field. Until they raised holy hell. Until they grabbed hold of freedom for teenage female athletes.

So, what does freedom mean to you, to whatever category or identity of person you are? And we all have categories and identities: retired, widowed, parent,

student, black/white, commuter, veteran, in recovery, in treatment, LGBTQ, and more, Christian, you name it; we're all several somethings, each with its own specifications for freedom. And America has always tried hard to extend freedom, to expand the definition of freedom, to protect freedom. I like that. It makes July 4th even better, year after year.

My mission travels around the world put me face to face with a number of revolutionaries from Africa, Latin America, Asia. "Freedom fighters" was a common term for revolutionaries. I often asked them what motivated them, what led them to fight for freedom? And most of them had some variation of the same answer: the Bible and America. The Bible, with its long history of lifting our sights, raising our expectations, setting our gold standard for being; America, with its long history of ever-onward struggle to be not only the "home of the brave," but also the "land of the free." Turns out that freedom can be a great exemplar, a great motivator, *and* a great gift. Happy July 4th!

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," No. 720.

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
for amber waves of grain;
for purple mountain majesties
above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with servanthood
from sea to shining sea.*

*O beautiful for heroes proved
in liberating strife,
who more than self their country loved,
and mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
till all success be nobleness,
and every gain divine.*

*O beautiful for patriot dream
that sees beyond the years
thine alabaster cities gleam,
undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
confirm thy soul in self-control,
thy liberty in law.*