

## **July 4<sup>th</sup> Weekend Sermon “Patriotism, Faith, and Childrearing”**

This is what God told Moses to tell the Israelites to prepare them to become a nation.

“So be careful to do what ‘God’ has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or the left.

Walk in all the way God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land you will possess.” (Deuteronomy 5:32-33)

Do any of you listen to sports radio? It’s great for sports nuts, but let’s face it, it’s all “Johnny One Note.” The seasons change, so the sports and teams change but the talk is the same: the team stinks, the coach stinks, the manager should be fired, the players should be traded. Non-stop outrage, disappointment, complaint, and whining. That’s pretty much the national conversation in every nation on earth. Every nation fails to live up to the expectation of the individual citizen. We pay our taxes, so... every road should be perfect, our military and police perfect, our schools and hospitals perfect, our work-life and vacation life perfect. Instead, there are potholes and policies and politicians that upset us; there are quality of life issues, safety and security issues, divergent opinions and practices that smash into each other. Add in entitlement, victimhood, ego, arrogance plus social media and really loud megaphones, and the result is, nobody is happy. I’m happy. That’s not the same as content or smug or satisfied. But I am happy.

This sermon is motivated by a widely quoted survey from the Wall Street journal that found that Americans who count patriotism as “very important,” or religion as “very important,” or childrearing as “very important,” or involvement in community as “very important,” have declined by 50% in the last 25 years. Across the board, only about 1/3 of the country is interested in patriotism, religion, kids, or community. Now it has long been said, correctly that we are products of our environment, and my environment is mostly you. And you love our country, you are deeply committed to faith, you care about kids, your and all the others, and you build community.

In the language of today, does that make us “unicorns,” or “outliers?” Are we oblivious, insensitive, willfully ignorant? No. We choose a perspective that shapes, well, our perspective, our attitude, our decisions.

After all, our Christian faith is popularly known as “the Good News,” and if we start each day rooted in Good News and live each day rooted in Good News, we may be annoyingly positive. Which is not the same as “out of touch.”

After all, I write for you a long essay on racism with all it’s hot-button topics, and we did several presentations of it.

I wrote a long essay on the war against Ukraine.

We’ve addressed gun violence, Islamic terrorism, antisemitism.

So, we don’t hide our heads in the sand. And yet, this is a positive, upbeat, Good News, happy place, all things considered. Even about patriotism, faith, children, and community.

Today, think with me about Patriotism.

As a Christian church we're inclined to look at the Bible for guidance and with some things that's easy. If I'm doing a sermon about "lying," we've got Bible verses like "Thou shalt not bear false witness," and Jesus' statement, "let your yea be yea and your nay be nay." Plus, there's the Bible story about Ananases and Sapphire who both dropped dead after lying about how much they gave to their church.

Likewise, if we zero in on Faith, the whole Bible is zeroed in on faith, plenty of go-to material.

We're told that "faith can move mountains," (Matthew 17:20) that "faith, hope and love abide," (1 Corinthians 13) that "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6).

And, throughout the Bible, great events, great accomplishments, great lives, unlikely victories, personal triumphs, inexplicable miracles – all are the result of faith. But when it comes to patriotism, in the modern-day sense, there's not much. Certainly, the most popular definition of Patriotism is "Love of Country." The Bible doesn't think about that. The Old Testament deals a lot with Israel, not as a nation to be loved but as a purpose to be fulfilled. Biblically and theologically speaking, Israel was established by God as an experiment. The tribes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became a nation for the express purpose of living out God's righteousness to such a degree that the whole world would take notice, be blessed. The "chosen people" were chosen to partner with God in this grand experiment. They were not a land, not a nation, not a religion. They were an idea, implanted by God, into a people. Theirs was a responsibility, a duty, a calling, and a burden.

So much of the Old Testament is the strong hand of God and the stern finger of God, pushing, cajoling, correcting, demanding “you must do better, you can be better.”

There was no Israeli version of “USA, USA, USA,” high fiving “attaboy;” no chants of “We’re Number 1.”

What the Bible does give us, especially in the Old Testament, is specific advice about how to be a good ruler, and a good citizen in order to have a good nation. For the ruler on the throne, the merchant in the marketplace, the farmer out in the countryside, the message is the same: justice, mercy, compassion, faithfulness. Be true to God. Be true to your word. Be true to your responsibilities. The nation serves a purpose. And the purpose is larger than the nation.

In the New Testament, there’s next to nothing about patriotism or nation. We are “strangers in a foreign land,” in the sense that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20) and “we are fellow citizens with God’s people” (Ephesians 2:19).

May I try out an oversimplified theory? The Old Testament plan might have been top-down: be a good nation, you’ll make good people. Jesus’ plan was bottom-up: make good people you have a better shot at being a good nation. In either event, nations were not the way they are today. Most people in ancient times were a tribe, worried about other tribes or a vassal nation, under the boot of ever-changing empires.

The modern-day nation state with its attendant nationalism is a relatively new invention. Italy, Germany, India are new creations. Today’s African and Middle Eastern nations were often carved by colonial powers or thoughtless bureaucrats with an out-of-date map. The United States is 50 years younger than this church.

And... we live now. We don't live in Biblical Times. We don't live in the age of Empires. We don't live like pre-historic nomads. This is 2023, with 195 recognized nations with our boundaries, our flags, our national anthems, each determined to be patriotic in some sense of the word. But how?

Let's go back to the Book of Deuteronomy again, when Israel was just beginning as a Nation. They had started out as a family, Abraham's family, a clan. They became a tribe, a wandering tribe, stateless, landless, nameless. They became Israelites when God changed Jacob's name to Israel, so his descendants are called "the children of Israel." As a tribe, they became immigrants in Egypt, then slaves in Egypt, so still – no land, no nation. After 400 years of slavery, God leads them out of slavery, out of Egypt and delivers them to "the Promised Land." A place called Canaan, already home to other tribes and kingdoms. After they conquered it all, Israel finally was a nation. Judea was the land, Judaism was the religion, Hebrew was the language, Jerusalem was the capital. And soon they had a king, and an aristocracy, and a merchant class and a standing army, and real borders and national holidays and a history.

To get them off on the right foot, God tells them repeatedly, "remember..."

"Remember who you are, remember where you came from, remember how you got here, remember WHO got you here. Remember your slavery," God says that a lot. "Remember the slavery. Remember your defeats. Remember your victories. Remember the miracles that saved you along the way."

And God gets very specific: “remember the bread I sent you, remember the freedom I got for you, remember the land of milk and honey “I brought you to.” He also reminds them to “remember”: “snakes, scorpions; dreadful deserts,” AND “enemies, defeats, betrayals” AND “pomegranates, olive oil, copper,” AND, again, “the terrors of slavery.” God is not afraid of the past. Or the truth. That’s part of mature love.

God doesn’t shy away from anything in Israel’s history, and God doesn’t want them to shy away, or forget, or gloss over. Israel had tremendous victories. Israel had horrible defeats. Israel committed awful injustices. Israel had lousy leaders, real superheroes, cowardice and courage, feast, and famine. And God tells them: “remember it all.” I think one of God’s underlying reasons was, remembering it all will make you proud...and keep you humble.

To me, those are the best bookends of patriotism. Be proud. Stay humble. I would go so far as to say honest-to-goodness humility is the path to honest-to-goodness pride. And note the term: “honest-to-goodness.” The honest part leads to goodness. And honest humility leads us to the goodness worthy of pride.

Here are two analogies. One low brow – sports – one high-brow – writing. Perfection is an absolute, near impossible rarity in all sports. A Yankee pitcher, Domingo German, pitched a perfect game this week, the 24<sup>th</sup> perfect game in baseball’s 150-year history. Every other game messed up. And that’s true of every athletic endeavor. You miss a putt. You strike out. You drop a ball. You fumble. You fail. The other team was better. Your opponent was stronger, faster. You flubbed it. You came up short. You lost.

True athletes devour each and every loss and miss and mistake. In my career as a player and a coach, AND in our family for five generations every game of every kind took at least six hours. Two hours to plan thoughtfully what you're going to do. Two hours to do your best trying to do it. Two hours to discuss in detail what you failed to do. All for the love of the game.

The same in writing. Writing has been an essential part of my life, just about my whole life. About 6000 sermons, 16 books, hundreds, and hundreds of poems, and that's only what made it to print. And writing, simply stated, is an arduous process. Most of my sermons take 15-20 hours a week. My books take about three years. They all begin with gestations, percolation, an idea, a word, a topic, and ink flows, the words pour out, the pages pile up. Then comes the hard part. Correction, upon correction. Crossing out. Tossing out. Ripping up. Fixing. Rewriting. Telling yourself point-blank, "this is not working...this is awful." Being honest with yourself. OR to put it in high fluting' language I tell myself, "This isn't worthy of you, or your reader. You can do better." All for the love of the written word. You see, I love sports, I love writing, O live America. That's what drives the desire to be better.

Last week we had the Memorial Service for John Waugaman, a good friend, a devoted church member, a wonderful family. John had a superb career in broadcasting, with Westinghouse, and one of his great successes was the popular New York City radio station W-I-N-S, WINS, 1010 on your radio dial, the all-news station. "You give us 22 minutes; we'll give you the world." I've always loved that station, W-I-N-S, WINS. Waugaman's baby. At the funeral were lots of Waugaman's broadcasting colleagues and in one eulogy a gentleman talked about Waugaman's outstanding, successful career, and what it was like to work with him, at

W-I-N-S, 1010 WINS. He said, people always asked what the call letters stood for, W-I-N-S, and everyone knew the answers: W-I-N-S:

Waugaman

Is

Never

Satisfied: W-I-N-S!

Your stuck with me as your pastor, and today you're stuck with me as the preacher, so I get to tell you, for me, that's the key to being an athlete, a writer, a Christian, a Church, or a Patriot. Never satisfied. Perfection is always ahead, to be striving for. And it's the striving that proves the love.

### **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, or were taken from far away to come to this far country. This became our Home, our Providence, our new Canaan.

Deacon: Joshua said to Israel as they came to the Promised Land, "Choose this day whom those 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.