

“FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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A Service of Thanksgiving and Prayer for Our Nation

Galatians 5:13-15

John 8:31-39

My brother Jeff is the computer guy in our family. He knows everything about computers - he actually works part-time on the Geek Squad at a Best Buy in Olympia, Washington. So if any of us ever have a problem with our computers, he is the man. He can actually log on to my computer in Elkton from his home in Washington and fix whatever is wrong. Ain't technology grand?

Well, if you know anything about computer geeks, you know they can't leave well enough alone. It's not enough that you can check your email, or write a letter, or log onto the internet. No, they have to add all sorts of gizmos and gadgets. I never know what's going to appear on my computer next!

But there is one thing that Jeff put on my computer that I really like. On the screen, on the far right hand side, where he has put a clock, the weather in Olympia (so I know what's going on in his life), and a daily scripture verse, he's also put a box that displays my pictures. So all of the pictures that I put on my computer from my camera, are displayed in that little box - they just rotate through - hundreds and hundreds of them. I never know who or what will pop up next!

It's just great. So during the time I was doing the background work for this sermon to celebrate America, I looked over all that box on my computer screen - and saw the most wonderful pictures that I had taken from my trips around our country over the years.

Sparkling glaciers in Alaska, Mt. Rainier peeking out from behind the clouds in Washington; Amish farmland in Ohio; yachts on the water in Newport, Rhode Island; Helen Keller's home in Tusculumbia, Alabama; whitewater rapids in Redstone, Colorado; adirondack chairs on a deck overlooking the ocean at the Outer Banks of North Carolina - and so many more. I've been blessed to travel to all of those places, and so many more - and seeing those pictures makes me remember them all - and makes me realize anew just how beautiful is this country of ours! From sea to shining sea!

So just when I was all happy about our country, I did some other research for this sermon. I looked at some things on the internet, and in the media, and within

two seconds, I was distressed. It was all so negative. I even looked up Fourth of July sermons on the internet, just to see what others were saying - and I'm sad to report, that many of them were very negative too! The media - television, radio, newspapers and magazines, emails forwarded across the country, and even preachers tend to focus on what's wrong with America - not what's right. It was pretty discouraging to only hear and see things bemoaning the state of affairs, and attacking the opposition, and pining for the "good old days." If only we still had prayer in our schools, if only the immigrants weren't around, if only . . . if only . . . if only.

Now, there is a place for discontent and disagreement, but I've about had my fill of the negativity that surrounds us these days. So today, I'm inviting us to focus on what is good about our country - what makes us special - and what we can do to keep our country great.

In the lessons this morning we are reminded about freedom. And, you know, we who are Christians in America are doubly blessed - because first, we have found freedom in Christ Jesus, and then, we are living in this land of freedom. We dare not forget either one of those things.

And we dare not forget, that, as the writer of Galatians reminds us, freedom carries with it responsibility. The writer says that freedom is not an opportunity for self-indulgence, but freedom carries with it an opportunity to care for and serve others.

So, this morning, I'd like us, as people of freedom, to consider just three things about our country, and then think about how we can care and serve in response to them.

The first is this: We need to remember and give thanks that there are people in our country willing to serve. First and foremost, those who serve in the military. Totally volunteer, they have chosen to put their lives on the line that this country, that we, might live in safety. Around our world this very day, millions of military personnel are serving that we might continue to be free.

Others serve by offering themselves for public office. Very often, that service is above and beyond their regular 9-5 job, and very often, it offers little or no financial compensation. They serve simply because they care about their community and they love their country. And far too often, they experience incredible pressure and scrutiny by an untrusting and skeptical public. They put their lives and their reputations on the line every day.

Did you know that the men who signed the Declaration of Independence paid an incredible personal cost for doing so? I was reminded again this week of how

costly it was to so many of them. Many were captured and tortured by the British. Others had their homes ransacked and burned to the ground. Several of them, who had been rather well-to-do businessmen, lost everything and died penniless. Thomas McKean of Delaware was so afraid for his family's safety that he constantly moved them to new homes, and he too, died a poor man.

It cost them dearly to serve this new country, but they paid the price because they were committed to freedom.

We need to remember to thank those who offer their lives in service, those in the military and those in public office whenever we can, and do our best to work with them instead of against them. It's what we're call to do as people of freedom.

Secondly, we need to wake up every day and remember that we are so very blessed to be able to live the lives we live - able to make choices and do things without anybody telling us we can't. Do you know how many people in the world can't do that? How many live under oppressive regimes and rulers who tell them where they can or cannot go, what they can or cannot wear, with whom they can or cannot associate? I think, far too often, we take our absolute freedom for granted, so today, on this Fourth of July, let us not do that, but rather, give God thanks for this great country of ours - where we are blessed to know such freedom.

Finally, as I talked about at the beginning of this sermon, let us never take for granted, never forget, what a beautiful country this is. Never forget to look around and appreciate the beauty, especially right in our own backyard. Rolling farmland, beautiful waterways, beaches and mountains two hours away, gorgeous cities just as close. Enjoy this wonderful land of ours, visit it, treasure it, and care for it as best you can.

So, what can we do in response to these things, and so many other things about our country. Well, we have a choice. We can continue on our complaining, and nitpicking ways, or we can choose to praise and pray. Praise God everyday for this land, its people, its leaders, its way of life, and then pray without ceasing. Pray for God to guide our leaders in the paths He would have them take. Pray that God would lead us as we live these lives of freedom, and pray with thanksgiving to God for the beautiful land, and for guidance and direction in how to care for it.

If we were to do that, to pray, we would be continuing in a long tradition in this country - back to the very first days of our republic. During the meeting of the Continental Congress, as you can imagine, there was incredible tension and strife, and there were times, that the men were so fragmented, they were close to giving

up the effort to frame a constitution. It has been said that just when things were at a fever pitch and many were ready to throw in the towel, a gentleman with white hair stood up and addressed the gathering. His name was Benjamin Franklin and he said this:

“Gentlemen, if it is true that not one single petal from any flower falls to the ground without escaping God’s attention, will the distress of this nation go unheeded? Let us therefore determine to seek His face.”

And that’s just what they did. All of those men got down on their knees, and prayed, and when they arose from that prayer, the slogan, e pluribus unum was born - one out of many.

Prayer for our country and its freedom helped then, and it will now, my dear friends. So, as we prepare to come to table of the very One who set us free, and after receiving, kneel and pray for our country, let me now close my sermon with a prayer from the year 1801, written by one Thomas Jefferson.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, who has given us this good land for our heritage; we humbly beseech thee that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will. Bless our land with honorable ministry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion, from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion into one united people, the multitude brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endow with thy Spirit of wisdom those whom in thy name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home, and that through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all of which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.