

Sunday 14 2010 C

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 4, 2010 *Occasional*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today is our nation's commemoration of independence. Every six or seven years, the fourth of July falls on a Sunday. Today is an opportunity for us Christians to spend a few moments thinking about our country, and our love of country, and how we reconcile our loyalty to our country with our loyalty to God. It's an opportunity to think about our country and our loyalties and what the Bible says. It is an opportunity for *theology*. *Theology* is that scary word that means talking about God, thinking about God, and what these things mean.

I myself resist talking about the nation in the pulpit. Our nation is very great, and is very flawed. Most sermons tend to focus on what is great about our nation, or what is flawed about our nation, without balance. If you are a serious Christian, you must begin with the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, the Savior of the World, the Lord of the Universe, was executed by the state. By the empire. Our ancient Christian creeds mention the governor, Pontius Pilate. For three hundred years after the crucifixion, Christians were persecuted, off and on, by the empire, and its leaders, and its military. The core Christian story, no matter how you spin it—no matter whether you are Quaker, Episcopalian, Russian Orthodox, Methodist, Roman Catholic, or Lutheran—the core Christian story declares that the most innocent and perfect man who ever lived, the only Son of God, was tortured and executed by imperial power. That is the Church's core confession. Christians must therefore be very careful about nations and empires.

Lutheran Christians must especially be careful. Because during World War II, most Lutherans supported Hitler. Most Lutherans living in Germany supported the Third Reich. The vast majority of the Lutheran pastors either supported Hitler, or agreed to not criticize Hitler in church or in public. Lutherans supported the nation, they supported the leaders, they were patriotic. They put country first. They put country ahead of truth and ahead of God.

So there are reasons why we should be cautious and conscientious about our loyalty to our country. The words of the Nicene Creed, "crucified under Pontius Pilate" can never be too far away from our thinking. This is why I put a beautiful Finnish song about country at the end of our worship service, instead of singing the National Anthem in the middle of our service. Christianity and Lutheran Christianity require a certain caution.

Patriotism can easily become conflated with Christianity. Have you seen decals with the cross of Christ draped in the American flag? It's an image that shows good intentions, but very careless thinking. The United States of America celebrates individualism. Both the Church, and

patriotism, require us to be something other than individualistic. They require us to be selfless. To put the common good ahead of others. They require service. And at their best, both Christianity and patriotism call us to noble actions, taking us away from selfishness and our base desires. Service to country is something akin to service to God. It is similar, but it is not the same thing.

Moreover, Christianity began with lots of martyrdoms. And there are still Christian martyrs today, just not in the United States. People who die for being Christians. In the United States, we do not have Christian martyrs anymore. Because religious freedom is protected here. But we do have military martyrs. Normandy is a place where Americans can go, and pay our respects to nine thousand American soldiers and sailors who gave their lives in a necessary war, a “good” war, if there has ever been a good war. Those who died in battle are as close as we can come to knowing martyrs. So patriotism is akin to Christianity, it is like Christianity. But it is not exactly the same thing. Loyalty to God and loyalty to country can overlap, but they can also be separated. That’s a very good thing to keep in mind.

A civil rights lawyer has the job of protecting the country from being too influenced or too controlled by any religious faction. A religious leader has the job of protecting the church from being too influenced or too controlled by politics or nationalism. That is why we are not singing the national anthem today in church. That is why I don’t normally preach about national holidays. Today may be the Fourth of July, but it also the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, and even though you may not care about the Church Year, it is my duty to care.

My own patriotism— my own love of the United States of America— is what I call patriotism from below. Instead of patriotism from above. In other words, I love the specifics of our country, and I trust the specifics of our country, more than I love or trust the generalities of our country. I’ve talked about how someday I am going to go to Minnesota. As a tourist. Some people say to me, “Why would you go there? There’s nothing there.” I beg to differ. The headwaters of the Mississippi River are there. The largest body of freshwater on this planet is right there at Duluth. I’ve never seen amber waves of grain. I’ve seen javelina, and I’ve seen alligators, in their natural habitat. But I’ve never seen wheat growing in a field.

There are fifty states in America. I have been in 38 of them. I once changed planes in Utah, so I count Utah. I’ve driven about ten miles into Michigan, and about one mile into Missouri, and I count them. I know where I’ve been in this nation. And I know where I still want to go in this nation. I am deeply in love with this nation. But I love America mostly from the bottom up. From the local details. The geography. The neighborhoods. The national parks. The sports fans. The food. The customs. The history.

Tucson is a perfect example of why I love America. We have a national park— one of the best in the country. Our national parks are one of the greatest things to love about this country. The mere fact that we created them says something great about this country. Tucson has minor league baseball. What could be more American than that? And other than the Toros, whom do

we root for? Russell Long says that we should have a church party when the Green Bay Packers play the Minnesota Vikings. Tucson probably is the only place outside of Wisconsin and Minnesota where that football game matters more than the Superbowl. And we have the Sonoran hot dog. America's greatest junk food was imported by our neighbors to the south, in Hermosillo. And they improved on it, adding even more cholesterol, and Tucson imported it back here. And now our hot dog is rival to Chicago and New York. And while Arizona struggles with the limits and the fairness of immigration, you can go to my new favorite place in Tucson, the Lee Lee Supermarket, which is owned and operated by Cambodian immigrants. And you will see Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Americans doing their shopping. As well as South American, South Asian, Egyptian, and Filipino American shoppers. And white Americans, walking around with their jaws hanging open. This is the America that I love.

I love America from below. I love Woody Guthrie's America. That's safer for me and for my spirituality. Loving America from above is not easy for me. These grand visions of America as God's chosen nation, the idea that the USA is the savior of the world, the conviction that America is infallible in everything she does just as some believe that the Pope is infallible in every thing that he teaches, these are concepts that I am not able to reconcile with my religious faith.

The Church inherited a practice and a custom from our Jewish roots. That is the practice of praying for civil leaders. The writer of the First Letter to Timothy says, *"I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."* If it weren't for the military, the law enforcement officers, and yes, those slimy politicians that we love to hate— if it weren't for them, we wouldn't have time to worship God or study the Bible. If it weren't for public schools, most of us wouldn't be able to read. Judges. Fire departments. Health inspectors. The Federal Aviation Administration. (When was the last time you praised God for the FAA? Probably when you were boarding an airplane.) We are able to live what the Bible calls a peaceable life because of public officials. The least we can do as Christians, is to pray for them. If we believe in the power of prayer, perhaps our prayers are the most important service that we render to this country. Think about it.

234 years ago, on this very day, the Declaration of Independence was signed. It would be a few more years before independence was attained. It would be a few more years beyond that until the nation was defined once and for all in our constitution. And as Abraham Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address, it would be 87 years (four score and seven) before the experiment would be fully tested and found worthy. There have been many mistakes in this country's life, just as there have been many mistakes in an honest person's life, but for most of us this is our home, this is our family, this is our baseball team, this is our hot dog, and this is our apple pie. As long as we always make God our top loyalty— as long as we love him with all our heart, and mind, and strength— we can enjoy and celebrate what is best about this nation, and we can honestly address what needs improving in this nation. Happy Fourth of July. Happy Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Amen.