

Independence Day

July 4, 2010

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;

It is tempting on Independence Day to celebrate our nation's birthday without pausing for critical reflection on the American experiment.

This can be dangerous for preachers like myself whose patriotism can make them assume that God has always been on America's side since its inception 234 years ago.

I sometimes refer to this as manifest destiny patriotism. Perhaps some of you will remember the doctrine from history class.

First coined by a journalist, John L. Sullivan in the 1840's, it grew to be a belief or policy that our nation had a special destiny, and mission from God.

This doctrine became popular in the middle to late 19th century for citizens who wanted a country that stretched from sea to shining sea, even though there were Native Americans between Ohio and California that had to be relocated or wiped out.

This type of patriotism forgets our legacy of slavery, and the racism in our country that over fifty years ago tolerated the interment of Japanese American citizens and in the 60's accepted lunch counters and restrooms that were only for white citizens.

Truth be told, I am sure that most of us are painfully aware that our nation's history has not always been one moral triumph after another.

And if our history has taught us anything, we should be wary of men or women who seek to claim God's endorsement for every action in our nation's history.

At the same time, even if we are realistic this morning about the nature of human sin, our country's moral failings, we should not forget that some of our founders believed their revolutionary break would not succeed without help from above.

As it says in the Declaration of Independence with a firm reliance on divine providence (even in the 18th century they were careful about the way they referred to God.)

The signers of the Declaration pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to the task of securing their freedom.

Certainly in 1776 this must have seemed like a foolhardy enterprise.

Washington's continental army was in retreat from New York being chased by the mightiest army and empire on the earth.

The harsh winter of Valley Forge was just ahead for Washington's army and there was absolutely nothing which indicated to any of the men sitting in Congress that their revolution had a chance of succeeding.

The men who met in the Continental Congress must have had great faith or courage to do something so bold and foolish.

And none of them knew if their decision (on July 2nd) would end with celebration or on the gallows.

Yet I suspect these signers of the declaration knew something about being the underdog.

Remember these men had grown up reading and hearing stories from the Bible.

And even those Deists who may not have believed in the supernatural stories must have marveled at the times when God or divine providence has interceded for the children of Israel.

Moses found himself at a dead end. He stood with water on one side and the Egyptian army on the other. Yet he did not despair.

David was the youngest son of Jesse and yet he did not shrink from taking on Goliath with a just a slingshot.

Queen Esther could have turned her back on her people when they were threatened by Haman but she took up their cause and delivered the Jews from annihilation.

Judas Maccabeus, two hundred years before Jesus' birth saw an altar of Jewish worship defiled by pagans, he took up his sword and waged a winning war against the mightiest empire of this time.

In each case the men or women who acted understood they had a role to play for the redemption and deliverance of God's people.

None of those heroes from the Bible always knew what the end result would be.

But they knew God had been faithful to his people in the past.

And each of them was willing to do their best, to take their place in the story.

This did not necessarily mean that God sanctioned all they may have done.

However, I think it does mean that they were ready despite their own sin and frailties to do what they thought God required.

This is the same ambiguity that Lincoln had the courage to express in his second inaugural address, "Both sides read the same Bible,

and pray to the same God and each invokes his His Aid against the other. The prayers of both sides could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purpose.

Despite the many contradictions of human experience, Lincoln closed his address with these famous word, with malice toward none with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all the nations.

Lincoln spoke to a nation which had endured four years of horrific war. And his words capture the way I think we should feel as patriots on this celebration of American Independence.

Jesus words from the gospel echo Lincoln's when our Lord tells his disciples, Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

And it is this type of Christian love is part of the challenge we accept as citizens of this nation.

Think for a moment how important love and reconciliation have been in our nation's history.

We fought the British for our Independence, we fought each other in 19th century, we fought the Germans in the last century and we struggled in the fifties, sixties and even today to sustain the belief that all people are created equal.

Yet in each case we found ourselves able to put aside our animosity and unlike the hatred we see in other places around the world, we did not let this hate possess and consume us.

Truly for our nation to continue to be blessed by God, it is important that we do not lose this capacity for love, for reconciliation and forgiveness.

This is what set Jesus' life apart from other prophets of his day and our Lord's example should continue to inspire us.

It is I know difficult as Lincoln said to always determine which side God is on, but Lincoln knew as should we that when the battle and struggle were finally over

The measure of our greatness as a people would be judged by the ability we have to bind up our wounds and the wounds of our enemies.

To have to courage as God's people to show the world the kind of love that truly can make freedom and equality a reality for all the human beings of this world.