

July 2, 2017

*“Things That Make For Peace”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Galatians 5:13-15; Luke 19:28, 41-44

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A few years ago I had the very good fortune to visit the Holy Land. What a great trip! I can still vividly remember our tour bus turning a bend and begin a steep descent down a huge hillside toward the ancient city of Tiberius. And there before us, filling the entire vista, was the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee. It felt surreal. Because there, on the land surrounding this great sea, was where Jesus Christ lived and worked and taught his people, his countrymen, about the Kingdom of God. And as I was taking it all in, I was filled with his presence. The next day we boarded a small boat and went out on the Sea of Galilee so we could appreciate how Jesus traveled on the waters of that great lake. So we might experience in some small way what Jesus may have experienced, and see with our own eyes the same things Jesus saw through his eyes. Because so much of the landscape in that area is the same as it was two thousand years ago. And as my senses were feasting on those feelings and sights - the awe I felt and the splendor of it all, suddenly the Palestinian crew manning the boat, played a recording of the Star-Spangled Banner. It didn't make any sense to me. I was reveling in the Kingdom of God, not the kingdom of man. And I felt a noticeable tension well up in me. Yes, I'm a proud citizen of this great nation, the United States of America. But Jesus Christ is my Lord. And God comes first for me, before country and even before my family. But then I realized that our Palestinian crew was only trying to pay us a great compliment. Here we were, foreigners, away from home, traveling in a different and sometimes dangerous land. And, out of respect for our visit and what we were doing and who we were, they played our national anthem. Because they, too, understand that love for country, love of homeland, is one of the things that ground us as a people and give us comfort and security. That's why we make such a big deal about the Fourth of July. Because it is a big deal. On this day we put America first because it celebrates the founding of this great republic, the land where we live, raise our families, and put our hopes and dreams. We celebrate those basic guiding principles for which our country stands – one nation under God... indivisible..., with liberty... and justice... for all. And on the Fourth, probably more than any other day, I think all of us here would identify ourselves as patriots – as ones who, regardless of all the political happenings, love our country.

Now some might ask, “Is patriotism contradictory to the teachings of the Bible?” Well let’s look at what the Bible has to say. Approximately, four thousand years ago God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. Their own land, where they could live and work

and raise their families and be in community together. God wanted them to have a land they could call home. And so from the beginning, I think we can see a sacred connection God wants us to have with our homeland. And, too, the Bible recognizes the need for government and the legitimate role government plays in the lives of its citizens. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul wrote, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except that given from God." He goes on to say, "Pay taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due." And in another letter, he writes, "I urge that 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." Jesus himself said, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," unreservedly acknowledging the role of government. And when Jesus taught about God, he used parables and illustrations of his beloved country that were near and dear to him – about the land and farming and families and neighbors. I truly believe that Jesus loved his land and its people and its traditions, as much as we love our land and our people and our traditions. In fact, in today's Scripture we see that Jesus is on a journey to the city of Jerusalem. When he comes before that great city, he stops, looks over it, and weeps. As God, he knows that in a relatively few short years, the Romans will destroy that city. And so he weeps. One doesn't weep over a city, the land and its people unless one loves it like a patriot. In my mind, these passages make it very clear where God stands when it comes to love and respect of country.

That's why love of America is a good thing. Perhaps the elite and intellectuals and cynics out there might not agree, but patriotism can be, and often is, ennobling, especially when we aspire to those wonderful guiding principles stated in the Preamble to our Constitution. Listen to them again... to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure peace and tranquility, promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty. What's wrong with that? Those are godly virtues, aren't they? Yet, as English writer Samuel Johnson once said, "Patriotism is often the last refuge for scoundrels." The problem is, people often talk the talk, but don't walk the walk. And all we have to do is think about the antics of so many of our politicians, from both parties, whose names I don't need to mention, who promise so much for country, but end up primarily feathering their own nests, and we know those words of Johnson to be true. For our country, as wonderful as it is, still has its problems and failings and flaws. So instead, perhaps we should look at our patriotism, as writer J.B. Priestley once said, "Like a loving and devoted wife behaves toward the man she loves... she will do anything for her husband except stop criticizing and trying to improve him."

Now we find that amusing, but isn't it exactly what Jesus was doing as he wept over and admonished his beloved city of Jerusalem. "If you (Jerusalem) had only recognized the things that make for peace. But they are hidden from your eyes... because you did not recognize it when God visited you." Yes, Jesus may have been a patriot, but he knew that the ultimate hope for all of humanity was not in government, it was in, and through the presence of God. The presence of God in our lives, where the things that make for peace – like all men are created equal, like justice for all, like promoting the general welfare, like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, all reflect the love and teachings of God.

That's why as good citizens of this country, we need to take both our freedom and our faith responsibly. We heard St. Paul tell us today, "Do not use your freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out – in no time at all you will be annihilating each other." That's a pretty clear warning. Because, consider this important fact – before we were citizens of the United States – before we had a birth certificate or passport or Social Security number, we were as Paul wrote, "citizens...of the household of God." He said, "Our citizenship is in heaven." And what he is telling us in the passage today is that with our freedom comes responsibility. And the responsibility of those of us who are citizens of heaven is to love one another. To love one another in ways of patience and forgiveness and understanding. To love one another in ways of hospitality and tolerance and acceptance. To love one another in ways in which we work for justice and fairness and the common good of all.

And just imagine for a moment how our lives, our homes, our workplaces, our communities, even our nation and our world could change if we truly did love our neighbor as ourselves. If we really did put ourselves in the other person's shoes, and love every person as God wants us to love with patience, gentleness, kindness, generosity, self-control. If we really did love that difficult neighbor, or demanding boss, or high-maintenance relative, or rebellious child, or estranged spouse. If we really listened to differing points of view and talked about it without getting angry. If we really did love and want the best for the immigrant, the poor, the oppressed, those on the fringes. These are the things Jesus was talking about that make for peace. Jerusalem didn't have it – can America? Can America lead the way? And remember, whether America makes for peace does not depend on a president or congress. It depends on all of us, being the people God wants us to be.

I want to end with a poem by Episcopal Bishop G. Ashton Oldham which hopefully reflects the true spirit of our country and its people. I used a little pastoral license to make a change or two, but I pray it resonates with all of us.

*America first, not merely in things material,*

*But in things from above.*

*Not merely in science, invention, and technology,*

*But also in ideals, principles, and character.*

*Not merely in the assertion of rights,*

*But in the assumption of duties.*

*Not flaunting our strength as a giant,*

*But bending in helpfulness over a sick and wounded world like the Good Samaritan.*

*Not in prideful arrogance, and disdain of other races and people,*

*But in sympathy, love and understanding for all.*

*(America first )Not in treading the same bloody pathway which ends inevitably in pain,*

*But in blazing a new trail, that other nations will follow, to a new Jerusalem.*

*Where war shall be no more (and peace shall reign).*

*Someday, some nation must take that path.*

*Unless we are to lapse into (future destruction)*

*And I covet that honor for my beloved America.*

*And so in that spirit and with these hopes,*

*I say with all my heart and soul, as a Patriot, America first.*

May you have a joyous Fourth of July weekend, and may God bless America. Amen.