

“Jesus and Independence”

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Opening Prayer

Good Morning, and happy late fourth of July! I am Pastor Jacob Hanson, and it is a joy to be here with you on the day after Independence Day. It is good to be back with you after a restful week of vacation. We are now gearing up more than ever for the birth of our child. When we talk about Independence Day, the Fourth of July, we talk about potentially the most patriotic holiday that is on our calendar. In 1776 the founding fathers of our nation signed the Declaration of Independence, and although the Revolutionary War was already on, it marks for us the official beginning of our nation apart from the British Empire. Now, 244 years later, we are blessed to be living in the country that we do. Even in the midst of Coronavirus, major protests, political unrest, riots and looting, and a whole host of other stuff that has come up in 2020, we are still blessed to live here. We should recognize the whole host of rights that we have. Although America isn't perfect we are able to worship the Lord in the most free way that any country has been able to ever. There is no mandated religion, no state required denomination, and no governing authority other than what we choose over watching how we worship Christ. With our independence from England of old, the United States began by recognizing that all of its citizens have the right to freedom of religion. No matter how you feel about the U.S. at the moment, all of us should be thankful for our country for that reason. In that same vein, as we talk about independence, we of course should recognize the much more important independence that Jesus has given us from sin and death. Our freedom from sin and death, our salvation, is of course the essence of the Gospel and is the great unifying force for all who call upon Jesus.

In our first reading from the book of 1st Timothy, the theme for our message today was laid out. That idea of independence from sin and subsequently our unification as Christians around God's commands is clearly seen. "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity." Beloved, isn't that what all of us really want at our core from our nation? To live a tranquil, quiet, godly, and dignified life in service of Christ? As we talk about Independence Day in our nation, we shouldn't forget that this is what our founding fathers wanted. More importantly, that is exactly what every Christian ever has wanted, including the Apostle Paul. This is why he writes as he does to Timothy, pleading for Timothy and the churches he pastors to be in prayer. He doesn't call for Timothy (and by extension us) to be in prayer just for the people he likes. This isn't a call for Christians to pray for their friends only, although praying for one's brothers in Christ should be done. This is a call to pray for the people that were in power, including the ones that persecuted Christians. Why? Why pray for this? Because there were two independences that come from such a prayer. An independence from persecution that comes from good rulers, and more importantly an independence that comes for all when Christ enters their hearts.

"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (vs. 2-5) Say what you will about the founding fathers in our nation. They were flawed men. Many held slaves, many were given over to vices, and all were completely human. That being

said, one of the premises behind our country is the idea that we are all under the Lord. We are all just men. In the time of Paul, the emperor of Rome was hailed as a god himself. The priests were the next in line, and you had to have good relationships with them in order to appease the gods and in order to appease the emperor. The truth, as proclaimed by Christ (who is Himself the truth by the way) is that all of us are equal in the fact that we are under the Lord. There is one mediator who stands between the all-powerful Lord and lowly, sinful, human us. There is only one who saves, and that is Jesus, God in Himself in human flesh. The desire for every Christian should be for all others to know the mediator, to be beholden to Christ, and to prompt other Christians to hold steadfast in their faith. A good Christian makes the best ruler and the best leader. A good Christian leader won't exploit, hurt, or abandon their people. A good Christian leader will lead in freedom even though he may be hated. The prayers from Paul and the other early Christians for the emperor to himself come to know Jesus are pleas that God would redeem the ones in power... who would in turn remove persecution and difficulty from their subjects. But of course that isn't the whole point here. The main point is a prayer for another man or woman to be saved. 2nd Peter 3:9 states "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." Did you catch that? The Lord desires all to be saved, even the most difficult and horrible and repressive and demonstrative people on this planet. Why? Because they are God's creations too. This lesson is appropriate for us to remember today, as we recognize the birth of our nation and remember our freedoms. This is important because that same call to prayer that Timothy gave is more pertinent than ever.

With all of this Covid business, all of this political unrest, all of this protesting, all of this rioting and looting, all of this insane rhetoric being thrown around, it is easy for us to forget that those “other” people out there are the Lord’s too. He loves them just as much and desires them to join us in eternity just as much as He does us. Paul called for Timothy and his churches to be in prayer for a despotic and evil regime in the Roman Empire. Those prayers resulted in the empire eventually giving way to the spread of Christianity worldwide, and the birth of the church as we know it. Satan hates that, and the narrative out there is that Christians brought death and destruction wherever they went, but we know the truth. Billions of souls were saved by the worldwide church that was started in the Roman Empire after Constantine and several emperors declared themselves as servants of Jesus. In the days of the Roman Empire Christians basically invented charitable giving and missional outreach. It was they who fed the poor, built schools, and fostered love for the unlovable. By these actions the Roman world changed. In our day, it is easy for us to hate those people we don’t agree with. You don’t have to look hard for someone who hates Donald Trump, Governor Walz, Senator Biden, Justice Kavanaugh, etc. Beloved, we should be praying for these people, especially the ones that we do not like. We should be in prayer for the rioters just as we should be in prayer for the people they victimize, not because we agree with the destruction but because we desire for their souls to be saved. We should be in prayer for the police protecting our country, not because we dislike them or like them necessarily, but because we want all of them to know Jesus. As we celebrate our independence as a free and prosperous nation this week, we should also celebrate the freedom that Christ has given us from sin and death. Furthermore, we should heed Paul’s call and lift up in prayer all those around us... even those who currently seek to end our freedoms... in the hopes that those

people too would know Jesus's saving grace. Our prayers have the dual effect not only of providing the peace that we so desperately seek at the hand of the Lord, but they also pave the way for others to know their Savior. As Paul says in verse eight "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension." Beloved, be in prayer for our nation, it needs it.

Our final scripture reading is one that you have probably heard before, although you likely heard it attributed to someone other than Jesus. "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." (Mark 3:24-25) Often those wise words are attributed to Abraham Lincoln, but they are of course a quote straight from scripture. Jesus spoke them in a parable about how He could not be an agent of evil if He was working against Satan. (He had just cast out a demon.) Abraham Lincoln, knowing that the whole country at that point knew their scripture, applied it to the Civil War. In our modern day there is difficulty in our nation. In many ways we feel more divided than ever in the United States of America. As we celebrate the 244th birthday of our nation this year, we should remember these wise words from our Savior that a house divided against itself cannot stand. In terms of our country, practically, the calling for us as Christians is to pray and to stand for what is just. Pray for your leaders, Beloved, even those who you cannot stand. Pray for the people who suffer evils in our country, and pray even for those who cause those evils. In addition be open about what is right and wrong, call sin what it is... sin. The evil actions of evil men, that is sin. You don't need to nor should you hide it. We are blessed to live in this country for many reasons, and to not love the place the Lord has put us would be a travesty even when it is hard. Finally, and most importantly in this year, know that the parable Jesus

speaks and Abraham Lincoln quotes about a house divided against itself not standing applies even more thoroughly to our churches.

I am not speaking about being ok with everything a so-called Christian does, nor am I saying that we cannot have differing views on important issues, but we must stand together Beloved in word and deed. Our two churches here, in our little corner of the world, must be united and stand together. We are made free from sin and death by Jesus's blood, we know the Lord through His word (scripture), and we act according to His calling for us. That is our true independence. In the aftermath of that glorious release from eternal damnation our right response is to stand together for the truth of the Gospel. We are Christ's church here in our town. We are God's people here Beloved, and we should act such towards one another. With many differing views on politics, homosexuality, Covid-19, and everything else, we cannot be divided on the truth that Jesus Christ is the way the truth and the life. We cannot be divided in our love for one another and for those outside our walls. As we celebrate our nation's independence, don't forget that you too are made independent of sin and death. As you do your civic duties to support your country, don't forget to do the same for your eternal home. Beloved Congregations of Kasson and Pleasant Corners United Methodist Churches, the Lord calls on you to do what is right, to preach the truth, and to be UNITED in your independence from sin. Happy forth of July, praise the Lord that in Him we are made free.

Closing Prayer

