

WE BECOME WHAT WE WORSHIP
PENTECOST 5 – PROPER 9 – JULY 5, 2020
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On the Fourth of July, we stop and celebrate what this country is all about.

What IS this country all about?

The Declaration of Independence, adopted some 244 years ago, included what is one of the most well-known phrases in English:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

So, equality, life, liberty, and happiness. Simple.

So simple that men and women have been fighting about what that means ever since.

For example, in 1776 “men” meant “white males.”

I am happy to report that, 244 years later, women are almost fully human and equal to men. Almost.

Now we are fighting over whether “men” can include people of color, as well as actual, certifiable, human beings who don’t fit within rigid gender definitions.

There is one term in that famous English sentence

where I wish we would go back to using the meaning it had in 1776: Happiness.

In 1776, the pursuit of Happiness was not about an individual “finding themselves,” or seeking pleasurable experiences, or being entitled to do whatever they darn well wanted.

The “Pursuit of Happiness” was about the right – yes, the *right* – of every person to be governed with policies that let them thrive.¹

The whole reason for the Declaration of Independence

was because the British government was doing the opposite: using government to oppress people, British citizens, who lived in the 13 colonies, so that they could not thrive.

The Declaration of Independence includes a list of some 27 abuses permitted or actively fostered by the King of England, from taxation without representation to burning towns to the ground.

Governments, according to the Declaration of Independence, should have as their goal creating communities where all people can thrive, not just those with a certain heritage, skin color, or bank account.

Now, as imperfectly as they may have lived into this ideal,

where did the people who drafted this document get this cockamamie idea that one person shouldn’t get what they want at the expense of another person?

that the happiness, the well-being, of the community hinges on everyone in the community having happiness, doing well?

That the “happiness” a society has a right to depends on whether all the members of that society are treated with dignity, respect, equality, and fairness?

It’s a 2-word answer: The Bible. Specifically, the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Every single one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence was a man of faith, and aligned with one or another Christian denomination.

Over half of them, by the way, identified as members of our denomination, what is now known as the Episcopal Church.

¹ https://news.emory.edu/stories/2014/06/er_pursuit_of_happiness/campus.html

That they were not all from the same brand of Christianity means that there was plenty of diversity in their beliefs.

But the principle of serving common good was shared by them all and that this principle was endowed by their Creator: God.

“Common” does not mean “conforming, and “Unity” does not mean “uniform.”

It’s perfectly OK that we do not agree with each other, that we have freedom of thought and expression.

Discussing differences is how we make positive change, moving over the years toward justice for all, not just those who think like we do, who look like we do.

Even as we remember where the principles behind our founding document came from, we must never confuse government and faith.

Those of us here today who are citizens of the United States must, as Christians, distinguish between the duty to support and defend our country, and our call to WORSHIP God, and only God, the God revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This cannot be overstated, because there is an ancient truth at work:

We become what we worship.

When we worship money, we become materialists.

When we worship ourselves, we become egoists.

When we worship a country, we become nationalists.

And the one word for worship of any and all of these and other things that are not God is idolatry.

An idolater is anyone who places their own desires and interests

ahead of serving the God who created them, and it’s the Number 1 “Thou Shalt Not” law.

But, it’s really, really easy to be an idolater.

Paul emphasizes this in his anguished letter about his wanting to do things right, getting it wrong, getting confused, getting lost serving his own interest instead of God’s.

And he does it time and time again. Idolatry IS the human condition.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus points out how we serve ourselves by tearing down others: we gripe, whine, complain, and judge others.

Jesus remarks that, on the one hand, John the Baptist came to town, and threatened folks with God’s wrath because of their sin.

We don’t want to hear words of doom and gloom.

We become furious with those who don’t tell us what we want to hear;

we claim the power to judge them, call them names, and damn them.

John, the forerunner of Jesus, was torn down by idolaters, people serving themselves.

On the other hand, Jesus tells how he came to town,

he enjoyed life and people and showed God’s unconditional love to sinners.

People didn’t want to hear that God cares for the poor, the outcasts, and sick as much as God cares for the privileged, the powerful, and the observant.

Idolaters, people serving their own interests, people just like us,

called Jesus a glutton and a drunk; Deuteronomy 21:20-21 requires that gluttons and drunks to be stoned to death.

This wasn’t just name calling, this was a threat.

We become furious with those who don’t tell us what we want to hear;

we claim the power to judge them, call them names, and damn them.

Like we did to John, we tore Jesus down.

we didn’t worship God; nope, we idolaters killed him.

There was a lot of this judging, name-calling and damnation going on in the First Century, and there's a lot of this going on right now.

If we become what we worship, what is pretty clear to me is that almost all of us in this country – including me – had better take a good look at what and who we actually worship, because I don't see a lick of what Jesus was like in judging others, name-calling, and condemnation.

What was Jesus all about?

The reading from Zechariah, a prophet who lived over 500 years before Jesus, described a scene that the Gospels applied to Jesus: a King riding to town, not as a mighty warrior raining down sword thrusts to get political power, but as the Human One, God with skin on, humble, bringing peace through a covenant sealed in his blood, not ours.

Under this covenant, all people, all people will know safety and hope.

God was pursuing happiness even for desperate, abandoned prisoners.

Jesus says of himself that he is not arrogant or haughty, but gentle;

he is not privileged and powerful, but of humble birth;

he is not a demanding disciplinarian, but compassionate,

and will even help us carry the heavy burdens we lug around in this life.

Yesterday, we celebrated 244 years of independence from king

who judged the people of this land as unworthy of basic human liberty,

and who relied on the 18th Century equivalents of chariots and warhorses to oppress, harass, and dominate us.

Today, we celebrate roughly 2,000 years of discipleship to a King

who judges all people as worthy of the blessings of hope and peace,

and who is gentle, humble, compassionate, and a willing partner in our troubles.

How is it that the words of the very document that founded this nation

have become so separated from the teachings that inspired them to be written

that we have turned "pursuit of happiness" into a private right

rather than mutual dedication to the common good?

How is it that in America today no political strategist from any party

would recommend that a leader describe himself – or herself –

as gentle, humble, compassionate, and a willing partner in our troubles?

I would like to pray an old prayer from the Book of Common Prayer;

we know it's old by the language it uses. *A Prayer for our Country:*

Almighty God, who hast 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 industry, 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 multitudes brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues.

Endue with the spirit of wisdom those to 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 the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness,

and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail;

all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²

² *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 820; it was also in the 1928 version of the BCP.

How is it that in America today we still believe the 21st Century equivalent of chariots and swords is even a logical path to peace for all men, and all women, children, blacks, whites . . . all humanity?

Well, I left being involved in politics over 20 years ago. I didn't have the stomach for it.

I'm dedicated only to discerning what it looks like for Christians, wherever they live, to be on a path of authentic discipleship following our only King, Jesus of Nazareth.

Again, what we worship is what we will become.

If we truly believe in equality, life, liberty, and happiness for all people, we need to worship the King who promised all humanity would have them and sealed the covenant with his own blood.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

God of compassion, you have opened the way for us and brought us to yourself. Pour your love into our hearts, that overflowing with joy, we may freely share the blessings of your realm and faithfully proclaim the good news of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

ZECHARIAH 9:9-12

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion. Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem. Look, your king will come to you. He is righteous and victorious. He is humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the offspring of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem. The bow used in battle will be cut off; he will speak peace to the nations. His rule will stretch from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth. Moreover, by the blood of your covenant, I will release your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to the stronghold, prisoners of hope. Moreover, declare today that I will return double to you.

PSALM 145:8-15

The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.

The LORD is loving to everyone and his compassion is over all his works.

All your works praise you, O LORD, and your faithful servants bless you.

They make known the glory of your kingdom and speak of your power;

That the peoples may know of your power and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom; your dominion endures throughout all ages.

The LORD is faithful in all his words and merciful in all his deeds.

The LORD upholds all those who fall; he lifts up those who are bowed down.

ROMANS 7:15-25

I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate. But if I'm doing the thing that I don't want to do, I'm agreeing that the Law is right. But now I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it's sin that lives in me. I know that good doesn't live in me—that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don't want to do, then I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it.

So I find that, as a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me. I gladly agree with the Law on the inside, but I see a different law at work in my body. It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body. I'm a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse? Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then I'm a slave to God's Law in my mind, but I'm a slave to sin's law in my body.

MATTHEW 11:16-19

[Jesus said,] "To what will I compare this generation? It is like a child sitting in the marketplaces calling out to others, 'We played the flute for you and you didn't dance. We sang a funeral song and you didn't mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' Yet the Human One came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved to be right by her works."

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you've hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have shown them to babies. Indeed, Father, this brings you happiness.

"My Father has handed all things over to me. No one knows the Son except the Father. And nobody knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

SERMON HYMN: *Lord Whose Love in Humble Service*

BLESSING: God bless your eyes to see the world as God sees, your lips to speak to others as if to Christ, your hands and work and heal in the power of the Holy Spirit, your minds to discern what is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise. Our Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit bless your hearts and set them on fire.