

“Spiritual Patriotism” Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18

July 4, 2010

6th Sunday After Pentecost

It has been asked, “Do they have the 4th of July in Canada?” Some have stopped to think a bit about this question. The answer is quite easy though: “Yes, they have the 4th of July in Canada. They just don’t celebrate it.” However, here in the United States, it’s a different story. We not only celebrate it today, but, because of the legal holiday, we will celebrate it tomorrow as well.

The 4th of July is a time for Americans to stick our chests and be proud. We hang up our red, white, and blue flags during the day and shoot off fireworks at night. We boast about great men such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. We boast about great events: the Boston Tea Party, the ride of Paul Revere, the brave fighting of Minutemen, the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution.

We end up feeling quite proud of ourselves as a country and quite proud of ourselves as individuals. This is the United States of America and we are American citizens. We are a great country and a great people. We gush with patriotism, especially on this day.

We may have a similar kind of feeling here in church. As I said last week, every Sunday here is an Independence Day. We come here to celebrate that we are free from the guilt of sin. We are free from the punishment of sin – death and hell. We are free from the original perpetrator of sin – Satan. Our sinful past has been wiped away and we have a glorious vision for the future.

How do we celebrate that? We may seek to have dazzling displays of music and singing. We may boast about great men – pastors in the history of this congregation, strong church leaders in the past, or even going back to someone like Martin Luther himself. We may boast about the accomplishments of these people and may attribute our success to them.

We look back to events of the past. Our congregation recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. In a couple of weeks, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod will meet in convention where there will be

a lot of reminiscing about the great things Synod has done. We may look all the way back to the Lutheran Reformation and credit that event for the success we have had in the past and where we are today.

We even look to ourselves. Our text begins with talk about Christian behavior. It encourages all of us who are spiritual to be examples and helpers to those who sin. We are encouraged to bear one another's burdens. We are to share our material goods with pastors and teachers of the Word. We are to avoid evil and never become tired of doing good, especially to fellow Christians.

Sometimes we look at that list and think we are doing a pretty good job. Our spiritual lives are strong. Our congregation is getting some good things done. Our Synod is orthodox in its teaching and practice. And we begin to get "spiritually patriotic". We celebrate ourselves and what we have done to get to where we are today.

There is a problem with this. We haven't done a good job. As individuals, as a congregation, as a Synod, and as the Holy Christian Church, we have not performed these things and the rest of God's Law constantly and consistently as God wills. In fact, we have often done a poor job in this area. The Christian Church is fragmented into many different groups throughout the world. There is often a lot of in-fighting and back-biting within a Synod or a congregation. And we tend to be overly optimistic in evaluating our personal behavior. Survey after survey has shown that the moral behavior of Christians is not significantly better than that of non-Christians. Yet we may still think that we are pretty good. As our text says, "If anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."

Is it wrong to be "spiritually patriotic", that is to express love, support, and defense of our church? Is it wrong to be proud and have a sense of loyalty in our spiritual lives? No, not necessarily. It all depends that *the object* of our love, support, and pride is and what it is we brag about.

Think back to the events that led up to the celebration we have today. Our country did not ultimately come into being because of statesmen like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and others. Our country does not continue strong and free because of fireworks, flags, and holiday fun.

Our country came into being and maintains its independence and freedoms because of countless American soldiers, from the Revolutionary War until now. We have the United States of America because of many who bled and died on the field of battle. Our freedom has been maintained because of many soldiers who have bled and died since then.

Such gore and death do not make for a happy 4th of July. Yet if we really want to celebrate our nation's birth and rejoice over the freedoms we enjoy, then we have to brag about our soldiers and the ultimate sacrifice which they made in dying for our country.

In the same way, the kingdom of God did not come into existence because of great church fathers and ecclesiastical leaders. It does not maintain its existence because of great church buildings, mighty Synodical structures, or even the best efforts of people who occupy these buildings and run these structures.

The kingdom of God exists and we are part of it only because of the cross of Jesus Christ and the suffering, bleeding, and dying which occurred there. Such gore and death do not make for "happy Christianity." When we sang the hymn of the day, it may have seemed to be an intrusion into our happy summer season. After all, it's a Lenten hymn. Yet it makes all the difference in the world.

The cross is a sign of weakness. It was an object of torture and a means of execution for the worst criminals in the Roman empire. To think that it could be used by God for good would have disgusted Jews and puzzled non-Jews. As the Bible says, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles," (1 Cor. 1:22-23).

However, the quote goes on: "but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:24) Through the suffering, sighing, bleeding, and dying of Jesus Christ upon the cross, God accomplished great things. He won for us the forgiveness of sins and established a new relationship between God and mankind. In our baptisms, as the text for today says, each of us became "a new creation". Our attempts at obedience could not obtain this nor do they matter. The fact that we are all new creations is all that matters.

Through the crucifixion of Christ on the cross, as Paul says, "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." As new creatures, we are not bound to the ways of this world. We are freed to live like the admonitions earlier in the text say. We are free to be spiritual examples to those who transgress. We are free to bear one another's burdens. We are free to share our goods with those who bring the Gospel to us. We are free to not grow weary in doing good but to take opportunity to do good to everyone – especially our brothers and sisters in Christ in this congregation, in our Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and to our Christians throughout the world.

There is a place for spiritual patriotism in our individual lives and in our lives together in the church. However, it is not boasting about ourselves – our moral character, our spiritual endeavors, or our good deeds. With Paul, we say, "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Through His actions on the cross in suffering, dying, and rising again, we have become new creations and we have new lives to use in His service by serving our neighbor. Therefore, we look to Christ alone and His cross alone to see who we are and what we have become.

This is a very patriotic weekend for Americans. We will express our devoted love, support, and defense of our country in many activities. Although most of them will be simple fun and expressions of pride, don't forget the men and women who have shed their blood and died so that we might have our country and enjoy our freedoms. In the same way, make every day a day for spiritual patriotism in which express our devoted love, support, and defense of the kingdom of God. Don't let it be reduced to fun activities or bragging about ourselves. Remember the cross and the shedding of

blood and the death of Jesus by which we have the kingdom of God in our midst and enjoy the freedom of the Gospel. It's not about fun and its certainly not about what we have done. As the Scripture says, "herefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:31)

Amen.