

"It's July 4th. What's To Celebrate About the U.S.?"

Well, it's July 4th. Independence Day. A weekend to celebrate our nation's birth with parades and fireworks and family cookouts. But somehow this year the celebration of our nation's birth seems to be not quite as festive.

I don't need to tell you that the social and political climate in our country is turbulent and toxic. Republicans and Democrats are at war with each other. They differ on just about every issue: abortion, the border, climate change, defense spending, gun control, health care, stimulus checks, the infrastructure package.

The political scene today is marked by *extremism*: both on the right (the conservative camp) and on the left (the liberals and progressives). In the past, Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, found a way to work together and get things done. Laws were passed with bi-partisan support. Moderates on both sides of the aisle could compromise for the good of the country. Those days seem to have slipped away.

The *social climate* of our country is filled with unrest: violent protests in the streets, charges that our country is defined by systemic racism and angry denials of that, bitter arguments over sexual orientation and gender issues.

I've been mulling over this sermon for weeks – what to say on this Independence Day. Do I talk about the painful social and political divide in our country? I want the gospel to address what's really going on in our lives, and our country, and the world. The risk with that is that I come across as pushing my political views on you. You don't want that. I don't want that. I want to minister to people on all sides of the political spectrum.

Some clergy do take sides politically, publicly. *I don't want to go there!* The outgoing President of the Southern Baptist Church recently at their convention this year cautioned that denomination not to identify itself with any political party. He had a great line! He said, "Whenever the church gets in bed with politics, the church gets pregnant. And the offspring does not look like God the Father." The gospel transcends political parties. God is not a Republican, nor a Democrat!

Keeping all this in mind, I do want to talk about our country today, and if anything can be done to bring healing and unity to our nation.

The text I want to use is Psalm 133. It's a very short psalm. It begins: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). This could be translated, "How good and pleasant it is when 'brothers' or 'families' live in unity." Bible scholars tell us this psalm might have referred to *families* living in harmony, but most likely it was speaking of *the nation* – Israel. How good if the people of Israel can be unified and agree!

The Psalmist then describes just how good it is! It's like oil, poured on the priest Aaron's head. This oil would run down over the priest's body, and even onto two onyx stones on his chest bearing the names of the 12 tribes – a fragrant scent enfolding and unifying the 12 tribes.

And for the nation Israel to live in unity would be like refreshing dew, heavy on Mt. Hermon in the north, and dripping down to Mt. Zion in the south – dew, *water* - so precious in that land where rainfall was so scarce. Wouldn't it be sweet and pleasant if *our nation* could live in harmony and unity!

Can we ever overcome the hostile divisiveness that tears our country apart? One thing that will have to happen is that we ***stop deifying our view and demonizing those who disagree with us.*** So many of us are entrenched in our own viewpoint when it comes to politics. We know we're right, and those who disagree with us are *wrong!* I have a "friend". He is a passionate, defiant Republican! He has a name for the Democrats. He replaces the "c" in Democrats with an "n". They are "demon-rats". This attitude, obviously, is not helpful!

The Republicans are right, and they are wrong. The Democrats are right, and they are wrong. No party, no perspective is entirely right, or wrong. It's hard to be objective when we talk about what's happening in the country, and what needs to be done. Our biases and emotions get in the way. The news media adds to the problem. I think we'd be hard pressed to deny that the news media is biased: the mainstream media like NBC and CNN is liberal/progressive; Fox News favors the Republican/conservative side of things.

So, can we *listen* to each other, and *learn* from each other, without demonizing those who disagree with us? Until we can do that, not much of anything good can happen. The psalmist said, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).

The social unrest and political turmoil we're seeing today is certainly not the first time our country has experienced this. The 1960's, for example, were a turbulent period in our history, with the Civil Rights Movement, and the anti-Vietnam War protests. And remember, we fought a *Civil War* in the 1860's. *But I believe this is also one of those especially critical times in our nation's history.*

There is a cultural war taking place in the United States. Very different visions for what the United States should be. It's kind of represented by those who on the one hand want to hold to the traditional values that have shaped our country, and on the other hand those who feel that widespread, core changes need to take place in our culture and society. With these vastly different visions of our country dividing us, is it even possible that we can be united? Is there any hope? I don't know.

But I think if there is any possibility for healing and unity we will need to avoid two extremes. ***The first is to minimize or be blind to our country's shortcomings.*** Our nation's history is not as rosy and pure as some would make it out to be. For example, a number of our nation's Founding Fathers were slave owners. Of the first 12 Presidents, 8 were slave owners. George Washington owned slaves. The Declaration of Independence states: "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." The primary author of this document was Thomas Jefferson, who was a slave owner, and saw Negroes as inferior,

childlike, untrustworthy and could see no way for African-Americans to live in society as free people.

Slavery remains a dark blotch on our nation's history. Last March on vacation I read the book *Bound for Canaan*. It's a book about the Underground Railroad, the network that provided an escape route for slaves seeking their freedom. Places in Lancaster County were stop off points for the underground railroad. I was reminded of how horrible slavery was, and the inhumane treatment of these human beings. And the Church often supported this, or did nothing.

Even after slavery ended **segregation** became a dark chapter in our nation's story. Not too long ago, someone I know made the comment to me that she has black friends, and they have a different attitude, a different feeling, for our nation's history. That simple statement just got hold of me. It was an "aha" moment! For all these years I've been celebrating our country with its freedom, and not even thought that it's not the same for those who've suffered because of their skin color. Why could I just not "get it" before? And to think, as late as the 1960's *segregation* was in place.

Some of you may have seen an episode of America's Got Talent featuring a singer by the name of Archie Williams. Mr. Williams is a black man who was falsely accused of raping and stabbing a white woman at her home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1982, even though his fingerprints were not at the crime scene. Three people testified that Williams was at home at the time of the crime, yet he was sentenced to life in prison. He says that as a poor, black kid he didn't have the ability to fight the state. He spent 37 years in prison, before finally being acquitted. During his time in prison he turned to singing to escape the nightmare he was going through. When I heard him tell his story, and then sing beautifully, it was a powerful moment - it brought me to tears. And the injustice Archie Williams experienced with the criminal justice system was duplicated so many times with black Americans.

And think of what we did to the American Indians. And the fact that women only got the legal right to vote in 1920 with the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. So when we celebrate our country, may we never forget our nation's flaws, and the work that still needs to be done.

But the other extreme to avoid is to minimize or be blind to the good that's been part of our nation's past and present. There is a movement within our country to say that we are so bad, that our past and present is so permeated with evil and injustice, that we need to create a totally different kind of America. Traditional values are rejected. Capitalism is looked upon as the problem. Institutional racism is ingrained in our way of life. And all of this has to go. This narrative is becoming more and more pronounced in the news media, in our educational institutions, and in politics.

Stephen Ambrose was a noted American historian and author. He wrote an interesting article about our Founding Fathers for Smithsonian Magazine. He wrote these words about George Washington: "In New Orleans, in the late 1990s, George Washington Elementary School was renamed Charles Richard Drew Elementary School, after the developer of blood-banking. I don't

see how we can take down the name of the man whose leadership brought this nation through the Revolutionary War and who turned down a real chance to be the first king of the nation. 'But he was a slaveholder,' students sometimes say to me. Listen, he was our leader in the Revolution, to which he pledged his life, his fortune, and his honor. Those were not idle pledges. What do you think would have happened to him had he been captured by the British Army? Washington's character was rock solid... Washington came to stand for the new nation and its republican virtues, which was why he became our first president by unanimous choice and, in the eyes of many, including this author, our greatest. Washington personifies the word 'great.'" (By the way, Washington did free his slaves).

Of course, the term that's emerged from this effort to erase from our history anyone who is deemed a racist is the "cancel culture." But who are those people who set themselves up as judges to determine who goes and who stays in our national history? Do we eliminate from our history anyone with character flaws (or is it only *certain* flaws that are deemed unacceptable)? Aren't we all flawed human beings?

Several years ago I read the biography of a young North Korean girl who escaped North Korea and found freedom. Her name is Yeonmi Park. The book details the horror of living as a child under the North Korean regime, the abject poverty, her mother having to scrape for enough food for each day, the lack of freedom, the constant mind-control and brainwashing that took place in that country. She says by the time she was 13 she saw people drop dead of starvation right in front of her.

With the help of Christian missionaries she and her mother escaped North Korea, and eventually came to the U.S., and in 2016 she transferred to Columbia University from a South Korean university, and was deeply disturbed by what she found. She said this in a recent TV interview: "I expected that I was paying this fortune, all this time and energy, to learn how to think. But they are forcing you to think the way they want you to think... I realized, wow, this is insane. I thought America was different but I saw so many similarities to what I saw in North Korea that I started worrying." Those similarities include anti-Western sentiment, collective guilt and suffocating political correctness.

Yeonmi saw red flags immediately upon arriving at the school. During orientation, she was scolded by a university staff member for admitting she enjoyed classic literature such as Jane Austen. "I said 'I love those books.' I thought it was a good thing." But the university staff member replied, "Did you know those writers had a colonial mindset? They were racists and bigots and are subconsciously brainwashing you." It only got worse from there as Yeonmi realized that every one of her classes at the Ivy League school was infected with what she saw as anti-American propaganda, reminiscent of the sort of anti-American propaganda she had grown up with in North Korea.

She was also shocked and confused by issues surrounding gender and language, with every class asking students to announce their preferred pronouns. "English is my third language. I learned it as an adult. I sometimes still say 'he' or 'she' by mistake and now they are going to ask me to call

them 'they'? How the heck do I incorporate that into my sentences?" "It was chaos," said Yeonmi. "It felt like the regression in civilization." "Even North Korea is not this nuts," she admitted. "North Korea was pretty crazy, but not this crazy."

After getting into a number of arguments with professors and students, eventually Yeonmi "learned how to just shut up" in order to maintain a good GPA and graduate.

"I have seen oppression, I know what it looks like," she says. "These kids (the students) keep saying how they're oppressed, how much injustice they've experienced. They don't know how hard it is to be free." "That is what is happening in America," she states. "People see things but they've just completely lost the ability to think critically."

You can take from this what you want. To me, it's very troubling to read this, that someone who has experienced social and political oppression should come here and compare what she went through in North Korea to what we are doing in the U.S.

I hope on this Independence Day we can be aware of our shortcomings as a nation – both in our past and in the present, and realize we've got a lot of work to do.

But I also hope we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, and fail to appreciate the strengths of our nation, and the freedoms and opportunities we have.

I can't help but think of the irony that in a time when many are claiming that our country is racist and unjust at its core, so many thousands of people are streaming to our borders, trying to get in, that we don't know what to do with them. So, HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AMERICA!

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Illust. Penn State's "Preferred Name and Gender Identity Policy." No longer use "he-him" or "she-her", only "they-them". Students no longer identified as Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, that these terms "carry racist and sexist connotations".