

Pentecost V (Propers 9B) RCL
July 5, 2009

St. Margaret's,
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Today is the fifth Sunday in the season of Pentecost, and it is also the Fourth of July weekend. The readings we've heard this morning are those for Pentecost V, but our lectionary also includes readings for Independence Day. That offered me some rich choices for preaching. But it also raised some interesting issues around this whole business of mixing religion and patriotism.

History is replete with examples of the constant tension between the two; between church and state... times when religion was at the service of nationalism; other times when the state derived its authority from the church; and times when the two were synonymous.

In contemporary America, it's popular in some churches to fly the flag and to promote patriotism as a religious value, even to the point of promoting patriotism as a Christian duty. That, however, is not the case in our tradition, The Episcopal Church. That is not to say that Episcopalians aren't patriotic.

In fact, eleven of our Presidents have been Episcopalians; more than any other denomination. Thirty-one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Episcopalians. Too many public figures to number have been and are members of this church, to say nothing of those of us in this very nave right now who have served this country proudly, and who celebrate this Independence Day with true awareness of its meaning.

But that is not to confuse religion and patriotism. Instead, we walk a fine line between the two, and that is directly related to our history as a church.

You'll remember from your American history class... or from your confirmation class... that during colonial times, the Church of England sent missionary priests to the Americas. They also sent young American-born men to England to be educated and ordained, and to return to serve as priests. It was natural then, that when the Revolution broke out, some "C of E" clergy were loyal to the crown while others felt pulled by their American identity as well as their love of the church.

When the war was over, the church leaders who remained took council and formed the Episcopal Church of the United States of America. In its first prayer book in 1786, Propers were appointed for the observance of Independence Day on the 4th of July. But at its General Convention in 1789, Bishop White encouraged that the observance be dropped... primarily because of the awkward position in which it put the clergy who had opposed the Revolution. It wasn't restored to the lectionary until the 1928 Book of Common Prayer.ⁱ

Now, I know that was probably more detail than you wanted to know. But it does help explain our tradition of very dearly embracing the principle of the separation of church and state. And that principle was and is consistent with our Anglican, non-

doctrinal tradition. We do not require members to subscribe to a particular doctrine or set of beliefs beyond the Nicene Creed. Our primary identity as Episcopalians is in our worship.

That's why any combination of religion and patriotism is a bit tricky for us. We live this out in a delicate balance. For instance, we pray in every service for our bishops and church leaders... *and* for our President and public officials. Today in particular, we will give thanks for the freedom we enjoy in our prayers [and we will revel in all our patriotic songs during the Sing-a-long between the 9 and 11:15 services]. As we do this – as we come for our regular Sunday worship and also celebrate Independence Day, we must be very clear about what we are doing and who we are.

What we are doing is celebrating that as Americans, we enjoy the freedom that allows us – in fact, guarantees us – the right to gather for worship at all. At the same time, we remember that we are first Christians. And who we are, both as Christians and as Americans, includes being foreigners and pioneers in a new land.

My Bill, for instance, comes from German Schindlers and Scottish MacCullemaires. I come from Irish Herlans and Dutch-German Lowes. Like Abraham and Sarah – who, by the way, are the subject of one of the readings for Independence Day – all our ancestors came from someplace else and set out for a new land.

Most of them were so desperate that they left behind everything they held dear -- family, friends, language, culture -- to strike out for the unknown. Like Abraham and Sarah (according to the letter to the Hebrews), "They did not keep thinking about the country they had left." (TEV)

Their survival depended not only on their ability to embrace this new and challenging wilderness, but also on their willingness to let go of all that was behind them. They had to let go of old loyalties, as well as let go of the anger and despair that drove them here. ⁱⁱ

It was their faith in God which sustained them, which enabled them to make such an amazing journey into unknown frontiers.

Our frontiers are less tangible. They aren't charted on maps or discovered on camelback or sailing ships. They are spiritual frontiers... theological and social frontiers. Perhaps they are even political frontiers.

And it is difficult to be pioneers, particularly of these less tangible frontiers. The early opponents of slavery, for example, faced opposition, even legal repercussions and physical danger. Those who worked for women's suffrage and planned parenthood were vilified and often called heretics by their own pastors. They were even subjected to persecution and imprisonment.

Closer to our own time, those who called the church to rethink the issues of divorce and remarriage were labeled radicals. And I can personally bear witness to the struggle toward the ordination of women. Being a pioneer in a new frontier isn't easy. In fact, it's in direct contradiction to our desire to stay in safe, familiar territory; our desire to cling to what is predictable and stable.

But the history of God's people is that God is always calling us into new places. Always asking us to step into the unknown. Like our forbearers, we can't settle in the past. Instead, we must trust that God is with us as we forge ahead.

As a nation, we are being called into new territory. For the first time in modern history, we are the only superpower. How are we to live out that responsibility? How are we to promote human rights, democracy and freedom, while also respecting other ancient cultures? Are we ready to truly accept the responsibilities inherent in our wealth and riches? Where is God leading us? What are the Christian values that guide us in this new frontier?

As a church, we are also facing new frontiers. We are entering an era in which the majority of the Anglican Communion consists of people of color from the southern hemisphere. We are facing historic disagreements on biblical authority; on the global economy; and on the very definition of Anglicanism. We are still living in the wilderness of racism – our first African-American president notwithstanding – and we are being asked to consider how God regards variations in our human sexuality.

It would have been so much easier for Abraham and Sarah to stay at home. It might have been safer for our pioneer ancestors to stay in the old country. It would certainly be easier for us to hold onto the past instead of wondering into the vast unknown future. But that is simply not in the script; not part of the story of the people of God.

But through it all, we can count on God being with us, guiding us, and even redeeming the messes we make. We can count on that because it's our heritage. It's our history. And it's God's promise.

Today, as part of the Fourth of July weekend, we can celebrate the freedom we are privileged to enjoy: the freedom to worship, the freedom to be pioneers, the freedom to follow our God. At the same time, we can celebrate this wonderful church that we love and cherish, both its traditions and its courage to follow God wherever God calls us to go.

We are the descendents of Abraham and Sarah, of Schindlers and McLemores, Herlans and Lowes, of all the names represented here today! May we have their courage. We already have God's grace.

Amen.

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ⁱ Lesser Feasts and Fasts, p. 272

ⁱⁱ Brightest and Best, Sam Portaro, p. 113