**7 Pentecost**

**The Sunday Before Independence Day**

**July 3, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Most of you will remember the 1970’s sitcom “All In The Family” with Archie Bunker, his wife Edith, their daughter Gloria, and her husband Meathead all living under the same roof. Archie was a bigoted conservative and his son-in-law Meathead was a borderline hippie. The clashes between Archie and Meathead were a major part of the script.

Well, I think many of you know that both Caren and I have been married before, which means that we have former spouses and spouses’ families … our former in-laws. My former father-in-law (God rest his soul) was a two-star general in charge of the Army Reserve forces in North and South Carolina when I was a young college professor. This was in the early 1070’s … think Vietnam. In his eyes I was a draft-dodging, long-haired hippie who had stolen his daughter off the family farm, and I know I was an embarrassment to him whenever my wife’s extended family got together. Although we didn’t live under the same roof, we were a living example of “All In The Family.”

Some of the time we could laugh it off … at least as a way of diffusing the tension. But there were times, and when I marched in the streets to protest the war in Vietnam, and then openly supported George McGovern for President in 1972, my former father-in-law accused me of being unpatriotic. According to him I had crossed a line … a line that he had marked … and so I was unsuitable to be an American. The fact that I was born in Canada didn’t help. At the time my religious faith was just beginning to find expression, yet my core values about the inherent worth of every human being, social justice, and the care of the planet were solid. When I told him I was going leave my faculty position at a university, take his daughter and our two young children to Alexandria, Virginia outside of Washington, DC to study for the ministry, he looked incredulous. I don’t remember his specific words but what I remember hearing … if only in my mind … was that there was no room for a faith like mine in the Church.

I entered seminary in the fall of that year … 1972 … and I came face to face with the intersection of Church and State. Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia is just 10 miles from the United States Capital. Many of you have heard this story before, but at my first class in seminary I had hair down to my shoulders, a leather headband, a full beard, and I was wearing a dashiki, jeans and sandals … and I was sitting between a retired admiral and a retired judge. My former father-in-law aside, the question of what role that faith should … or might … play in our political decisions was front and center.

Yet, this has been a question since the founding of this nation. On this Sunday … a day before Independence Day … it is an issue to look at once again. Tomorrow many of us will watch grand fireworks over the Nation’s Oldest City as we celebrate this country’s 240rd birthday … the anniversary of the date when the Declaration of Independence was signed by members of the Second Continental Congress. For over two centuries we have been an experiment in democracy … a nation governed by her people. And, we must remember that the people who founded this nation were people of faith, and 240 years later faith is still prominent in the discussions about our government. But in a nation with a growing diversity of faith opinions, what role does faith have in determining the rules and laws by which we live in this country?

The signing of the Declaration of Independence was the defining moment in the history of this country. The founders of our nation were saying that just because we were colonies of Britain it did not make us any less worthy of justice and fairness. The words of the Declaration of Independence were the guiding principal behind everything that was to follow … The Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the interpretation of them in the legislature and courts. In many ways those words function like a mission statement identifying the core values of the people of this nation.

But living out that mission has not always been easy. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were all white Christian men. They were all Caucasian … they were all Christians … and they were all male. Interestingly, sixteen of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Episcopalians … almost a third. It was the culture of the day, and that culture of privilege was taken for granted by most people, especially those who were white Christian men. So, if “all men are created equal” as the Declaration of Independence proclaims, to whom did this equality apply? Just who was worthy of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” Did that include literally everyone? Was this a generic use of “men” referring to all human beings, or was it specific to the male gender? Did it include slaves and the Native Americans who were called “Indians”? “All men are created equal” … except under the Constitution as it was written in 1789 slaves only counted as three fifths of a person.

The issue of which “men” were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights has not been an easy one for this country to figure out. In the 21st Century we may take for granted that men and women of all races and colors are considered “equals” under the law, but that is not always the case … just look at the disproportionate incarceration of young black men in this country.

On this Sunday before Independence Day I want to acknowledge and affirm the role of faith in the founding of this country. In spite of the fact that I often offer the opening prayer at St. Augustine City Commission meetings, I also believe strongly in the separation of Church and State for the protection of both the Church and the State. I figure if someone is going to pray at St. Augustine’s City Commission meetings it might as well be me.

In the past year the intersection of faith and government has been very visible in issues such as the legalization of marriage of same sex couples, the availability of birth-control in religious orders under ObamaCare, and the issues of abortion rights. Just this week the United States Supreme Court decided a case against certain provisions in a Texas law limiting abortion clinics, and a federal district court judge followed suit in our own state of Florida. If faith had a role at our country’s founding it certainly has a role today. But then the question is, who speaks for the people of faith?

You have heard me speak of Senator John C. Danforth before. He is a Republican who served for 18 years as a United States Senator from the state of Missouri, and also served as a United States Ambassador to the United Nations. Danforth is also the Rev. John C. Danforth, an Episcopal priest. The Rev. John C. Danforth officiated at the funeral of President Ronald Reagan at the National Cathedral in June of 2004.

A year later, in 2005, Danforth wrote an Op-Ed piece for the New York Times titled "Onward, Moderate Christian Soldiers." I have read portions of this piece before … usually for a July 4th sermon … but I believe it is just as relevant today as it was when it was published. In writing about the role of one’s faith in the arena of politics John C. Danforth said:

*It is important for those of us who are sometimes called moderates to make the case that we, too, have strongly held Christian convictions, that we speak from the depths of our beliefs, and that our approach to politics is at least as faithful as that of those who are more conservative. Our difference concerns the extent to which government should, or even can, translate religious beliefs into the laws of the state.  
  
People of faith have the right, and perhaps the obligation, to bring their values to bear in politics. Many conservative Christians approach politics with a certainty that they know God's truth, and that they can advance the kingdom of God through governmental action.*

*Moderate Christians are less certain about when and how our beliefs can be translated into statutory form, not because of a lack of faith in God but because of a healthy acknowledgement of the limitations of human beings. Like conservative Christians, we attend church, read the Bible and say our prayers.  
  
But for us, the only absolute standard of behavior is the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Repeatedly in the Gospels, we find that the Love Commandment takes precedence when it conflicts with laws. We struggle to follow that commandment as we face the realities of everyday living, and we do not agree that our responsibility to live as Christians can be codified by legislators.*

*For us, religion should be inclusive, and it should seek to bridge the differences that separate people. We do not exclude from worship those whose opinions differ from ours.*Danforth concludes with a statement with which I could not agree more:

*Following a Lord who sat at the table with tax collectors and sinners, we welcome to the Lord's table all who would come. Following a Lord who cited love of God and love of neighbor as encompassing all the commandments, we reject a political agenda that displaces that love.*

Our holy scriptures speak of justice and compassion; of hope for a better world for future generations; and of calling us to extraordinary reconciliation. The founders of this nation spoke of justice for everyone; a hope for generations yet to come; and extraordinary inclusion beyond the existing cultural norms.

On this Sunday before Independence Day we are reminded that this nation is filled with people who express their faith in many different ways. Our way takes seriously what Jesus took seriously. But it is not the only way, and we have no right to impose it upon others, nor do they have the right to impose their faith upon us.

Our faith … even a moderate or progressive Christian faith … has a role in the intersection of faith and government. Being a citizen has it rights. It also has its responsibilities. One of ours is not to be silenced by louder voices. It is important for those of us who are sometimes called moderates or progressives to make the case that we, too, have strongly held Christian convictions, that we speak from the depths of our beliefs, and that our approach to politics is at least as faithful as that of those who are more conservative. It is a reminder that we are not “unpatriotic” just because we hold a different opinion based upon our faith.

Amen.