

## “They Desire a Better Country”

Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48

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It is a true joy to welcome you all back into the sanctuary today, after such a long time away. Last summer, I was preaching to an empty sanctuary; since September, I have been preaching into a computer screen. At least I could see some faces, even if they were digital. But this is infinitely better!

We have a lot to celebrate today. The saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ, as always. Our resumption of in-person worship here in his sanctuary. And, coincidentally – or, perhaps, providentially – our nation’s independence. The last time July 4 was on a Sunday was eleven years ago!

Independence Day is not to be found in the Presbyterian liturgical calendar. In our Presbyterian world, there are no specific prayers or scripture passages for this day. For us, this is simply the “Sixth Sunday after Pentecost,” and the appointed readings have to do with the beginning of the reign of King David, Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” and Jesus sending out his disciples two by two. In many Presbyterian churches around the country, those would be the scripture passages you would be hearing today. But I discovered, fairly recently, that at least two branches of the Christian faith here in the United States do have Independence Day as an official day on their liturgical calendars, and one of them – the Episcopal Church – even has a set of scripture readings that have been appointed for Independence Day since at least 1979. I decided, since Independence Day is on a Sunday this year, to go with *that* set of readings.

The first reading comes from the book of Deuteronomy. The context is a speech that Moses gave to the Israelites, just before they entered the Promised Land. Moses reminded the people what *God* values, and what that meant the *people* should value. “The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome.” There is no being, anywhere, more supreme; no one greater, or mightier, or more awesome than God; no one more worthy of worship than God. God “is not partial and takes no bribe.” God’s favor cannot be bought. God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow.” God cares for the needs of the most vulnerable people of society: children who have no parents, wives who have lost their husbands. God also “loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.” The word “stranger” – the Hebrew word *ger* – is sometimes translated “alien” or “sojourner.” It refers to foreigners, people who are not Israelites by birth, people who have come from other countries, newcomers who do not have any inherited rights, people who have made a home – whether for a short or a long time – in the land of Israel. The word occurs nearly a hundred times in the Bible. It is first used to refer to Abraham, in the book of Genesis, who was a foreigner who had arrived in the land and had made his home there. He had come from Mesopotamia, from what we now call Iraq. The reading from Hebrews spells out some of the details: “He stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.... They were strangers and foreigners on the earth....” The Bible is clear: the founding

fathers of the Israelite people were foreigners – strangers in a land that was not their ancestral home.

God is very concerned about the treatment of foreigners. Moses says, “God *loves* the strangers” – *love*; that’s a very strong word! God “provides them food and clothing.” They may have arrived in the land with nothing but the clothes on their back. They need some basic essentials. Moses tells the Israelites that they are to treat the foreigners *as God would*: “You shall also love the stranger.” Why? Because “you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Remember the story: Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph ended up in Egypt, on account of his brothers’ jealousy and treachery; Joseph rose to become a trusted official in Pharaoh’s court, then, when there was a famine, Joseph’s father and his brothers came down to Egypt in search of food. They were strangers, foreigners in the land of Egypt. They settled there; they had children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But as time wore on, as the Egyptians forgot about Joseph, the Israelites went from having the favor of Pharaoh to becoming the objects of Egypt’s discrimination. They were treated differently because they were foreigners; they were set to hard labor; they became slaves. It literally took an act of *God* to free them from their bondage. Forty years later, after making their way to the land that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had lived in as foreigners, Moses reminds them, as they are about to create their own nation in the Promised Land, not to treat foreigners in Israel as they had been treated in Egypt. God makes it abundantly clear: discrimination against foreigners has no place in God’s holy land. “You shall *love* the stranger.”

So that’s the thrust of the first passage appointed for Independence Day. I suspect it’s here to remind us that the vast, *vast* majority of people in our country are like the Israelites: descendants of people whose originally came from other countries, far, *far* away. If I look back in the history of my family, if I go far enough, I find ancestors who came to this country from Europe. Most of you could probably do the same. In most cases, immigrants left their countries of origin because they were in a bad situation, and they saw hope and freedom and opportunity here, in this land. Some of you, though, may have ancestors who came here by force; who were brought here against their will, either as slaves or as indentured servants. Some of our ancestors came here *looking* for hope and freedom and opportunity; other ancestors came here *denied* of hope and freedom and opportunity. This passage reminds us all: the people of God are called to *love* the strangers. Love the aliens, love the foreigners. Failure to do constitutes not only a violation of God’s *will*, but is also antithetical to God’s very *nature*.

I’ve already touched on the New Testament passage to some extent, but there’s a bit more that is relevant. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob “confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.” What the author of the letter to the Hebrews is saying is that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were looking *forward*, not *backward*. They had no desire or intention to return to Mesopotamia. They weren’t thinking about the country they had left *behind*. They knew that their future was to be found in the land to which they had *gone*. They were strangers and foreigners in that land. They were seeking to create a homeland in a land that was not yet their home. God had revealed to them that the land eventually *would* become the home of their descendants. But all three of them died with the promise, the dream, unfulfilled.

Many of our ancestors had to undertake a similar effort: trying to make a home in a land where they were strangers and foreigners. It was not an easy process. Many colonists died from disease or the harsh conditions; some colonies failed entirely. But many other colonists pressed on, building towns, and later cities, stretching further and further into the continent, *determined* to make this land their

home. There were some significant costs to that effort. What happened to the native inhabitants of this land was truly tragic. So was the forced importation and enslavement of millions of native Africans. But the effort on the part of the European immigrants and their descendants was, of course, ultimately successful; for the vast majority of us truly do consider this country to be our home. New waves of immigrants weren't always welcomed with open arms, however; it seems that each new generation of immigrants has to *work*, and sometimes *struggle*, to make this country their home – despite the words of Emma Lazarus that are indelibly inscribed on our Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” We haven't always greeted the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” with welcoming, open, and loving arms.

Which brings me to our Gospel passage, a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the most important sermon ever delivered. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” These may well be the most difficult-to-follow words that Jesus ever spoke. For it is easy, *so* easy, to hate or to persecute people who don't share our heritage, or our beliefs, or our skin color, or our native language. We can be so disrespectful; we use language that divides, “us” vs. “them.” When it's a mostly-friendly rivalry between favorite sports teams, that's one thing. But when it takes the form of labeling whole groups of people, treating them with less respect just because they're “different,” passing laws that favor privileged groups at the expense of the less privileged, well, we are *way* outside the bounds of what Jesus believed and taught. Even if there are people who really are *enemies*, or people who truly *persecute* us, Jesus still calls us to *love* them. For most of us who are white, things rarely get *that* bad, except in times of war, but minority groups have had to deal with hatred and persecution for centuries. I'm not talking just about Blacks, or native Americans, but also about Jews, Muslims, Asians, Hispanics, the *millions* of Americans who identify as LGBTQ, and the *many* women in our country who – despite all our progress – continue to experience various forms of discrimination or harassment in the workplace. White guys like me really don't have *any idea* what it's like to be on the receiving end of persecution, discrimination, or harassment. Which is why it's so important that folks like me make an effort to *learn*.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said, “they desire a better country.” He was talking about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – strangers, aliens, foreigners. In one sense, he was talking about their desire to make a *home* for themselves in a new land, a desire shared by many of our own ancestors, and also by many immigrants today. There are *so many people* who want to call this country “home.” For many of us, that comes pretty naturally. For many others ... it doesn't come naturally, or easily, at all.

But those words refer to something else as well. The writer says, “they desire a better country, that is, a *heavenly* one.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were seeking a *spiritual* home. That does not negate their desire for a *physical* home – or else they would never have left Mesopotamia for Palestine in the first place. But it does mean that, no matter how much we feel “at home” in *this* land, for those of us who are Christians, our *ultimate* home is *with God*. We all have a home we will go to when *this* land is no longer our home. We get glimpses of that spiritual home here on earth, every time we seek to do God's will, every time we listen for God's word. I love this country, I love the principles it stands for, I am *so deeply grateful* for all the blessings and liberties I have in this land that I call “home.” But we Christians should love even more the *spiritual* home we have with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

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