

First of all, I want to thank you all for coming to church on July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, as I know there are many exciting things going on which could easily pull us away from church.

But despite that, you saw the importance in making church a priority, and I applaud your decision.

As we all know, this is arguably the most patriotic holiday of the year, when civic religion and American pride get whipped up into a frenzy and we all pat ourselves on the back for what a great nation we are and what a gift we are to the rest of the world.

If only they could be us, they all want to be like us, those are the undertones that I hear around this holiday.

I have even heard warped theology in which America is identified as the Promised Land.

We are the new Israel.

The European settlers were fleeing Europe, just as the Israelites fled Egypt.

And in this narrative, the new settlers were given the divine license to commit genocide against the people who were already living here because God had given them the land in advance, it was theirs for the taking.

They believed that as the new Americans, they were God's chosen ones.

You still hear murmurs of this notion that America is the Promised Land and Americans are privileged above and beyond people of other nationalities.

This is merely one example of how things can get ugly and messy really quickly when you start to mix civic religion with Christianity.

So, on this Independence Day weekend, I was asked to preach about how we can be American and Christians, Patriotic and Christ-followers.

How can we be both proud of our country and connected to a whole global community of other Christians?

How can we reconcile these two identities?

Are they compatible or mutually exclusive?

Well, my opaque answer that most people don't like is: it depends.

I say that it depends because it depends upon which identity you claim first, which one is primary, Christian or American?

If you are an American Christian, or an American first and a Christian second, if you put country before God, then you have to craft your theology to align with your belief that we are a superior nation with superior people.

You have to take those biblical scriptures and interpret them in such a way that they extoll the existence of the United States.

The problem with this is that the scriptures and Christianity came about long before the United States was even an idea, so to use those ancient stories to justify how our young nation is more worthy than other nations, is, in my opinion, irresponsible.

To identify as an American and then a Christian, will most likely lead you to privilege America and Americans over other countries and other peoples, and I have yet to see how this perspective can be maintained while authentically following Jesus and his teachings.

However, if you say that you are a Christian American, or you're a Christian first and then an American, now we might be getting somewhere.

This, I think is possible.

If we say that we are Christians and apply our Christian values to our country, I think we'll find that those values are in our country's best interests.

Okay, well what are these beliefs that uphold as Christians?

Well here are a few that I came up with... loving your neighbor, being generous and humble, forgiving your enemies and those who persecute you,

welcoming the stranger to the table, not cheating or stealing or killing, believing that all people have sacred worth, and that we need to be stewards of the environment.

If you hold our country to the same standards, we (all people who live here) will be better off in the long run.

Now, one thing that Jesus emphasizes a lot in his ministry, which I think our country could learn from, is how to make peace with one's enemies.

I picked this scripture from Ephesians this morning because it speaks so beautifully about two disparate groups figuring out how get along and be unified in Christ.

It's not hard to stretch this to apply to our context today.

I hear the news, and every other headline seems to pit the United States against another country or another peoples.

So, pick a group of people in your mind, either a religious group or an ethnicity or citizens of a specific country that you think are adversaries of our country, and listen to this scripture in the context of the United States and the people/nation you've chosen,

*<sup>14</sup>For [Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*

*<sup>15</sup>He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,*

*<sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both groups to God...*

*<sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God..." (Ephesians 2: 15, 16, 19).*

See, what a peaceable kingdom we could all share if we lived into these values on a political scale.

And, if you learn about the values and worldviews of our founding fathers, I think their beliefs are compatible with the ideals that we uphold.

In terms of welcoming the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, the person without a homeland, Benjamin Franklin said,

*“Strangers are welcome because there is room enough for them all, and therefore the old Inhabitants are not jealous of them;*

*the Laws protect them sufficiently so that they have no need of the Patronage of great Men;*

*and every one will enjoy securely the Profits of his Industry.*

*But if he does not bring a Fortune with him, he must work and be industrious to live.”* (Benjamin Franklin, Those Who Would Remove to America, February, 1784).

And we’ve been hearing a lot of talk lately about us and them, fear of the other, the outsider, the different one, it’s all fear mongering.

Take a listen to what John Adams said about the incapacitating emotion of fear, *“Fear is the foundation of most governments;*

*but it is so sordid and brutal a passion, and renders men in whose breasts it predominates so stupid and miserable,*

*that Americans will not be likely to approve of any political institution which is founded on it.”* (John Adams, Thoughts on Government, 1776).

In summary, we should not live in fear of others or make decisions based on fear of others, sounds pretty Christ-like to me.

And one last example which illustrates that our Christian values are aligned with our civic ones.

Genesis chapter 1 says, *“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”* (1:27)

and of course, in the book of Galatians, Paul says,

*“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (3: 28).

These two passages remind us that there is no distinction with humanity, we are all loved by God, created in God’s image, God did not delineate between race, gender, nationality or creed.

And I believe these truths are made manifest in the famous phrase from the Declaration of Independence that says, *“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.”*

Have we as a nation upheld these ideals perfectly? No way.

Have we as Christians lived into Jesus’ teachings perfectly? No way.

Both our nation and our religion fall short.

But guess what? It's not all bad news.

As people of the majority religion living in one of the most dominant countries on earth, we are in a supreme position of power.

It might not feel like it everyday.

You might not wake up every morning saying to yourself, "Wow, as a Christian American, I sure do have a lot of power and privilege!"

But you do, which means that we have a wonderful opportunity to use our power for GOOD.

I don't think it's realistic for us to expect our elected representatives to blaze the trail of morality and ethics, but we can set the example for them.

If we, as a global, trans-national community of Christians were able to organize ourselves and have healthy, peaceful relationships with one another, then we could hold our elected leaders to the same standards.

We could say, look, being peaceful, engaging in dialogue, taking care of everyone and the environment, turning enemies into friends, these things that we are living into as Christians with our other like-minded siblings around the world, Christian and non-Christian alike,

if you were to take make efforts on a federal level, to live into these values, then our country would improve.

We could implore them not to get involved in any more wars or conflicts because being at peace is in the best interests of all nations.

The problem, from a Christian perspective, is that we aren't unified in our beliefs, and we are so busy fighting with other Christians, that we can't present a united front on these moral issues, but we can get there.

So, let us celebrate this weekend not because we are better than others or in order to make an idol out of ourselves.

Let's celebrate because of the potential we have as such a powerful nation, to do right not only by our citizens, but by the entire world.

As the famous Frederick Buechner said,

*"The only patriots worth their salt are the ones who love their country enough to see that in a nuclear age it is not going to survive unless the world survives."*

*True patriots are no longer champions of any one country in particular, but champions of the human race. It is not the homeland that they feel called on to defend at any cost, but the planet earth as home."*

May we have the courage to be Christian Americans, rather than American Christians,

and by claiming that identity, live into our Christian values, trusting that they are in the best interests of our nation and the world.  
Amen.