

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost • July 3, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 10:1-20

“Homeland”

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”

Those words from President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address still ring out as a call to patriotic responsibility fifty-five years on. They're the height of a call to work together against the burdens of an imperfect world: tyranny, poverty, disease, war, and the like. President Kennedy hoped that the people of the United States and nations around the world could work together to “assure a more fruitful life for all mankind.” His address acknowledged that this great work might never be completed. It's a noble goal, but as history has shown, we still have a very long way to go.

This weekend our nation celebrates the 240<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4. People from coast to coast and beyond will get together to mark the occasion with festive events, parades, and more fireworks and exploding things than any other day of the year. We do this, not merely because we love fireworks and exploding things, but because this is our homeland. Being citizens of the United States of America is a significant part of our identity. Your identity as a citizen of this country marks you and sets you apart from the rest of the world. Look at the United Kingdom in the wake of their historic “Brexit” vote. The people there will now have to assess what it means if they move ahead in splitting from the European Union. What is their citizenship and place in the world?

We face what might seem to be a similar challenge as Americans who are Christian. While we live in a country that was founded on principles that include the free exercise of religion, there tended to be an overlap back in the day: most American citizens were Christians of some form or another. Once upon a time, American Christians optimistically viewed the United States as a “Christian” nation. But it wasn't then, and it isn't now. It's probably more accurate to say that it was “Christian-friendly.” If the country ceases to be Christian-friendly, does that mean that you have to cease being an American? Or cease being a Christian? Our problem lies in a confusion of identity, a confusion of citizenship.

As Americans, we are blessed to live in a country with unparalleled individual freedoms. Ours is, by most measures, a great country. Nevertheless, it's not a perfect country. Our country suffers under the burden of sin because there's sin in us, sin in her people. The law of the land isn't always good. For the past many decades, our laws have said that unborn human beings can be treated like personal property and disposed of at the owner's will. That's sin at work in us and around us. That's a sign that the devil is looking to enslave hearts and minds with the false promise of personal freedom, a lie that throws people under more and more burdens in this imperfect world. So what can be done?

Jesus sent messengers out into the towns and the places that he would be going. We heard about those seventy(-two) in today's Gospel text from Luke. They were messengers of peace, yet not everyone would receive them and the news of God's kingdom that they carried. When they came back from their mission, they reported the amazing acts that they'd done in Jesus' name. Jesus, in turn, encouraged them not to dwell on those accomplishments but to consider the even more awesome thing: their names were written in heaven. They were citizens of the kingdom of God. With apologies to President Kennedy – it's not what they had done for their country, but what their country had done for them.

As Jesus' messengers went out, they delivered the good news that God's kingdom has come near. God's kingdom, His reigning authority, was there to drive out the burdens of this imperfect world. As Jesus' messengers proclaimed his good news, it drove out sickness. It drove out sin. Jesus was seeing Satan falling like lightning from heaven as that deceiver was being booted out of people's lives and they were being set free.

God's kingdom is still come near today. And while you and I may not have been numbered among those seventy(-two) messengers that Jesus sent, we are very much agents of his freedom. Under the cross of Christ, your name is written in heaven. You are a citizen of the kingdom of God. You are forgiven. You are free. In Jesus, God has set you free from captivity to sin and self. He has kicked Satan off the throne of your life. And you get to go and proclaim the good news that God's freedom is here for your fellow Americans – and everyone else, too!

How do you know that you're a citizen? If you're an American, there's a birth certificate or a naturalization certificate that confirms your identity. For Christians, there's Baptism. Your baptism gives guarantee of your identity as one whose name is written in heaven. Baptism is not what you've done to become a citizen; it's what your heavenly Father has done to seal you as His own. Christians are "naturalized" into God's kingdom by His gift of faith; in Baptism, God signs the citizenship papers, declaring your freedom in Christ.

Don't reject your citizenship. Embrace it! As Isaiah proclaimed (Isa. 66:10-14), God has extended peace like a river to the heavenly Jerusalem, our homeland. That peace flows to you today as a citizen of heaven when we gather at the Lord's Supper. Jesus is here, delivering forgiveness and delivering freedom. Celebrate the peace that is yours in Christ – not with fireworks or parades, but by sharing it. As a citizen of heaven, you are a messenger of God's word of peace like those seventy(-two) that Jesus sent out.

Let your citizenship in heaven by God's grace shape your life now as a citizen of these United States. Don't be silent in the face of laws that permit tyranny against the defenseless or crush those in need. Do so with kindness and respect, serving as ambassadors of Jesus' self-giving love. That's part of the responsibility of your citizenship in action for your country, even as President Kennedy challenged Americans half a century ago. Yet as you seek to address injustice on the national scale, look to share God's grace on the personal level even more.

If you want to see a change in the world, join Jesus in his mission to give people real freedom. You can't successfully legislate morality; legislation doesn't control hearts and minds. But the Holy Spirit *can* turn both heart and mind through the proclamation of the Gospel. As you go out bearing God's word of forgiveness in Christ to people in need, Satan will be falling like lightning from heaven as people are set free from captivity to sin. More and more names will be written into citizenship in heaven. The Spirit works through people just like you, sending you as messengers of freedom in Jesus' name, assuring a more fruitful life for all mankind.

Our hope and our confidence as Christians is neither tied to nor limited to the present age. But we are here in this time and place to be messengers of God's peace. The kingdom of God has come near in Jesus. Through him, you have citizenship and a homeland in heaven.

And so, my fellow Christians: ask what your God has done for you – and in Jesus, see the answer.

**Amen.**