

Citizens in Christ

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 3, 2016

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.
Galatians 6:10

Tomorrow, July 4th, we celebrate the 240th anniversary of the founding of our nation. That era marked the establishment of our national identity as a free and independent United States of America. This is a time to appreciate the fact that we are citizens of a nation that guarantees the free practice of our religious faith. The recent death of Elie Wiesel reminds us of the importance of protecting the religious rights of everyone. The principle of separation of church and state in the Constitution protects freedom of religion as well as those who have no faith.

Other countries view us as a rather adolescent nation with many advantages and freedoms that we don't fully appreciate. We are seen as complacent people that take for granted our abundant resources and our use or misuse of them.

In his letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul exhorts us to work for the greater good of all, not just our own interests. As citizens of both our country and our church, Christians bear the responsibility to work together for the common good. Our right to dissent is guaranteed by the Constitution. Patriotism doesn't mean unquestioned allegiance. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously wrote that, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." It is just as much an act of desecration to use the American flag as a metaphorical blindfold as it is to burn it.

One of the best ways to appreciate what we are as a nation is to learn our history. Ron Chernow's book on Alexander Hamilton gives insight into the fascinating life of one of the principle characters in the founding of our nation. David McCullough's works about the life and work of John Adams gives us an appreciation of both our national and local heritage. Historically, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson have overshadowed Adams, yet John and Abigail Adams have much to commend them. The brilliant research into the life of John Adams gives us eyewitness accounts of the dramatic events of the founding of our nation. He is credited with writing the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the oldest constitution in continuous use. Much of the U.S. Constitution is based upon his remarkable foresight.

There wasn't complete unanimity at that first convention held in Philadelphia. Given the conditions and circumstances of the time, we can't help but wonder how we ever became a nation at all. On those hot, humid days in July 1776, there were serious questions as to whether there were enough votes to declare independence. The matter was settled by Caesar Rodney's last minute arrival, having ridden all night from his home in Delaware to cast the deciding vote.

In the end, Independence was declared and John Adams can be credited for much of the effort. We are fortunate that so much of his correspondence survives in which his wife Abigail urged him to "remember the ladies." Regrettably, women were overlooked and it took another 144 years until 1920 before women were given the right to vote. It took several more years for African Americans and Native Americans to be given the same right to vote. To this day, 240 years after winning a war against taxation without representation, the half million citizens living in the District of Columbia still have no voting representation in Congress.

With all its shortcomings, our form of government endures. It was John Adams who urged that this day be celebrated by solemn acts of devotion to God with parades, sports, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of the continent to the other. I like to think that much of the greatness of our nation lies in our ability to take bold risks after the example of those who "pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor."

Populist movements are emerging in our own country as well as in Europe. It appears that many of those who voted for Britain to leave the European Union knew little or nothing about the consequences of their vote and are experiencing “buyer’s remorse.” Modern populism can be found on both sides of the political spectrum. One form emphasizes nationalism and isolationism, resentment against government, minorities and immigrants and making assumptions with regard to nationality, race, gender or religion. Another form seeks economic justice and offers differing views on immigration, education, and the environment. In the intensity of this election year, we look for leaders who will work for the common good and not just the elite.

For those who feel overtaxed and are angry about government interference, you only have to remember that veterans who were given the opportunity to attend college on the GI Bill, and clean water and air made possible by the EPA. Children attend public schools and participate in a school lunch programs and then can attend state universities on student loans. We drive on interstate highways and use Amtrak when traveling. There are laws to protect our civil rights with respect to gender, race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation or disability. In retirement, senior citizens rely on social security and Medicare. Some of those who enjoy these benefits and protections will complain about government intrusion and tax dollars wasted on ungrateful people.

Read history and you learn that were it not for boldly progressive leaders in government, African Americans would not have been freed from slavery, there would be no civil rights laws, women would not have received the right to vote and children would still be working in factories. Were it not for those who would not accept the status quo these advances would not have been possible.

Compassion for social justice is love in action. You can’t talk about love without justice because justice is love distributed equally and fairly. A truly just society is when the basic freedoms and rights are guaranteed for all people and not just a few. As we celebrate our independence as a nation tomorrow, let us resolve to maintain our integrity by assuring the same rights and freedoms for every American.