

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2026
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel reading: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Let us pray: “Almighty God, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn: Grant that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain our liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” *Amen.*

Happy July fourth weekend everyone, we hope you are having a fun, safe and joyous celebration.

Yesterday, we celebrated our nation's 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On this year's July 4th, many of us may be having a lot of mixed emotions about our country, wondering where our nation is heading? What will America look like in 250 years? Or even 12 months from now? It is at these moments when it's important to ask ourselves, “What then to a Christian is the 4th of July? What has America's soul become?”

Someone once said, “Who can ever forget Winston Churchill's immortal words: “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall

fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills.” Those words sound just like our family holidays when we talk about politics and religion. Apparently, fireworks don’t only happen on July 4th.

Today’s gospel, I hope will bring us assurance and peace.

In today’s Collect, it mentions that it is in God’s name that this country was founded. This was because a great number of our founding fathers and mothers were Episcopalians, known then as Anglicans from Great Britain. These include people like Presidents George Washington, James Madison, and James Monroe. In fact, over half of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglicans. Many of our foundational laws share historical, moral, and cultural roots with Judaeo-Christian traditions. Including foundational laws against murder and theft or The Declaration of Independence which appeals to a "Creator" as the source of in-alien-able rights. So as we commemorate our independence, it is timely to ask ourselves, What to a Christian is the 4th of July? And what does July 4th mean?

First of all, these are two different questions. For many, July 4th means a day of gratitude. Gratitude for the core democratic principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, allowing us the freedom to express ourselves, even the

freedom to disagree with our government. But the other question, What to a Christian is the 4th of July, is a different question. One is about our nation's political freedom and the other is about our soul's ultimate freedom.

These questions require us to reflect on the two roles we uphold as American Christians. The roles we hold between the sacred and the secular, the temporal and the eternal, our allegiance to God, and our allegiance to the state, and the visions we have for the city of God and the visions we have for the city of man.

As followers of Christ, we have dual citizenships. Sometimes it's not easy to straddle between the two. Today's Epistle speaks about our struggles with two laws. There is the law of God and the law of our mind, making us captive to the law of sin. In our modern life, we are constantly bombarded with conflicting messages that require us to discern where we morally stand and where we align with what Christ commands.

Recently, when our president was asked about the Iran deal, he said, "If I don't like it, if they don't behave, we'll go right back to dropping bombs right smack in the middle of their head." When we hear a statement like this, what is our reaction? Where do we stand as a citizen of God's kingdom?

Straddling between the world and God's Spirit has been happening throughout history. Early Christians paid dearly with their lives for their decisions to desacralize their allegiance with the emperor, leading to their martyrdom. Jesus was crucified by the Romans on charges of sedition and treason, specifically for claiming to be the "King of the Jews." Every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, we are reminded whose allegiance we belong to, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

You may have noticed a bumper sticker that reads, "In the world, but not of the world." This verse was taken from John 17. Originally it was a prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples to live physically among the general population and engage with society, while rejecting the world's sinful values, selfish ambitions, and godless philosophies. Unfortunately today, this verse has been hijacked by Christian nationalists to subvert the biblical mandate by seeking political and cultural dominance.

Currently, there is a rise in "American Nationalism," or "America First," often found within the Evangelical Church. It is a political philosophy prioritizing domestic interests, national sovereignty, and preservation of traditional cultural identity over global policies, and international agreements. The Episcopal Church

actively rejects Christian Nationalism, viewing it as an exclusionary ideology opposed to the inclusive teachings of Jesus.

20th-century British scholar, C.S. Lewis describes nationalism as a nation who believes they are "markedly superior to all others." Christian Nationalism is dangerous and destructive, leading to the attitude that we have the power to destroy others. We have seen this practiced in history when countries dominate another countries through colonization, unfortunately, often in the name of God. C.S. Lewis once encountered a person who espoused such a viewpoint. He asked him, "doesn't every nation think of itself as the best?" The man responded in all seriousness, "Yes, but in England it is true."

Unfortunately every nation thinks they are the best. But for us who are the children of God, our allegiance is expressed in our baptismal vow, which reminds us to respect the dignity of all people, that God loves all peoples and nations without exception or favoritism. And that God wishes every nation peace rather than war.

Today's Gospel appropriately speaks to our uncertain times. Jesus says, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." When this passage was originally written, Jesus was speaking to people like us who felt overwhelmed by life's hardships brought upon them by legalistic rulers. They felt trapped, hopeless, confused and powerless, burdensome laws were deliberately created in order to suppress the rights of people. Just like those whom this verse was written for, we feel exhaustion from rights being removed today.

Jesus invites us to take his yoke instead, because it is easy and light. The Greek word for "yoke" is chrestos, which means more than just "easy." The word implies the idea of kindness and pleasantness. Bible scholars say that Jesus' yoke is as if someone you trust lays their hand on your shoulder to encourage you, to lead you gently to a place where you can flourish.

So what then to a Christian is the 4th of July?

To answer this question, we can simply look at our calendar as our reminder. Have you noticed how perfectly timed the 4th of July lands on our calendar? It comes just after the month of June when we celebrated the Independence of LGBTQia+

people after the Stonewall riots of 1969. It comes just weeks after Juneteenth, when in 1865, the last of the slaves were told they were free people. Then there is June 4th 1919, when the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote passed Congress. But now, I long for the day that we can nationally recognize and honor the original peoples of this land. Because this day of Independence, of freedom and liberty, is fragile and not yet available to all people.

So, what to a Christian is the 4th of July? It means removing the yoke people carry and taking upon Jesus' yoke which is kind and pleasant. As long as there are people who are not free, all of God's children are not free.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all 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.”

The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Whatever you do, you need courage. Whatever course you decide upon, there are always people who tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising that tempt you into believing your critics are right...Peace has its victories, but it takes brave people to win them.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson is correct, but currently, I think many of us feel more like the cowardly lion of The Wizard of Oz, who lamented to Dorothy when they met, “Then, if you don’t mind, I’ll go with you,” said the Lion, “for my life is simply unbearable without a bit of courage.” “You will be very welcome,” answered Dorothy, “for you will help to keep away the other wild beasts. It seems to me they must be more cowardly than you are if they allow you to scare them so easily.” “They really are,” said the Lion: “but that doesn’t make me any braver, and as long as I know myself to be a coward, I shall be unhappy.”

Take Jesus’ yoke of courage upon you. You too will always be unhappy if you do not have the courage you need to live out your baptismal vow. For there are still many who need our voice to claim their freedom.

This July 4th weekend, may we remember the millions of good people who call this nation home, who act with grace, gratitude, and courage to help the United States live into the power of its founding words. May we find our way to being the best America again, and the heart to listen to and love our neighbors.

Amen.