

May 28, 2006
One Nation, Under God: a Sermon for Memorial Day Weekend
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There were very few of my father's United States Navy pins and insignias...saved. A few have lived protected in a round, antique, lidded glass dish on my dresser. It was my grandmother's dish. These pins date back to the early 1940s when my father became a Naval officer, having graduated from MIT in Mechanical Engineering and wanting to serve his country. In my living room, there is his pocket sized military Bible on a table of old books. And in the garage, in a big lidded plastic storage tub, is a family album. In the album there is a handsome picture of my father in his Navy dress whites. These are some of my first teachings that I belong to a great nation, one nation, under God. I wonder if I thought of these when, as a child enrolled in Malvern Elementary School, Shaker Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, I stood beside my wooden desk each school day, placed my right hand over my heart, faced the American flag next to the blackboard and, at 9 a.m., I said in unison with the rest of the children in their classrooms, the Pledge of Allegiance? The original pledge sounded like this:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” And then we all sat down to do our lessons.

It wasn't until General Dwight Eisenhower, a Presbyterian, came home from the war and was elected as our 34th President, that he petitioned Congress to add “under God” in the Pledge.

When Becky Malick was in pre-school, each Memorial Day and Fourth of July we would decorate her bicycle with long strips of red, white and blue crepe paper, small American flags taped to the handle bars and red, white and blue plastic streamers flowing from the grips of her handlebars. Becky...and her good friends, Kelly Bryson and Seiko and Mene Okano, all members of the Lollypop Club that met under the branches of our big evergreen tree, would all go to the local park for a neighborhood parade, with patriotic music and Sousa marches broadcast from speakers. There would be a contest for the best decorated bicycle. It was such a happy time to live in one nation, under God.

For Presbyterians, there has always been a respectful and careful relationship between worship and nation, faith and patriotism, religion and citizenship: Presbyterians have never pledged to “one God, under nation.”

Weekends like this remind me of the young married couple whose 6-year-old son didn't want to go to church services. Under great pressure from both sets of grandparents, they called their pastor to ask for persuasive suggestions.

The Presbyterian pastor suggested they stop by the church on Saturday morning for a tour, milk and cookies. It was Memorial Day weekend.

As they stood at the back of the Sanctuary in the Narthex, the child saw a 5' x 8' brass plaque on the wall, surrounded by small American flags.

“What is that?” asked the child, pointing to the flags.

“Oh, come and see,” said the pastor. “Come and see the names.”

The four of them walked over and stood in front of the big plaque.

“Those are the names of all the people who have died...in our services.”

The child's eyes grew very big. He stepped back, asking, “Was it in the 8:15 service, the 9:30 service or the 11:00 service?”

Memorial Day began on May 30, 1868, after the Civil War. Five thousand participants helped decorate 20,000 graves with flags and flowers in memory of the Union and the Confederate soldiers buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Tomorrow, and annually, over 5000 visitors still gather there to see the silent precision of the changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the placement of a wreath of flowers.

Sometimes, an entire nation just needs to sit down...and weep... and remember.

It was during the Civil War that some of the great Christian hymns of the church were written, hymns in your Hymnbook. You, the members of Second, tell us you treasure these hymns and like to sing them. You scold us if we forget to include them in worship. And, for the sake of our 8000 radio listeners, here are the words: “My Country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride, from every mountain side, let freedom ring. Our father's God to thee, author of liberty, to Thee we sing. Long may our land be bright, with freedom's holy light, protect us by Thy might, Great God...our King.” This hymn to God, liberty and freedom was written in 30 minutes by a 24-year-old Baptist seminary student. On weekends like this, we sing to God the Navy hymn: “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” composed in 1860, written by a young student about to set sail for America; it is what is called a Trinitarian hymn, singing to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Eternal Father, strong to save, Whose arm has bound the restless wave,
Who bade the mighty ocean deep, its own appointed limits keep.
O hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea.

O Savior whose almighty word, the wind and wave submissive heard.
Who walked upon the foaming deep and calm, amid its rage did sleep.
O hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea.

O Holy Spirit, who did brood upon the chaos wild and rude;
And bade its angry tumult cease, and gave for fierce confusion...peace.
O hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea.”

Sometimes, an entire nation just needs to sit down...and weep...and remember...
and if possible, sing its faith in hymns.

One hundred years before these Christian patriotic hymns were written, our nation was suffering and weeping. The colonies were suffering under an oppressive magistrate, tyrannical laws and regulations, mock justice, arbitrary due process, excessive, unregulated taxation, exploitive power and a lack of representation of the people, for the people and by the people.

It was in and through pulpits that the nation, under God, awakened to Biblically-based realities and Bible teachings. Enslavement is wrong. Tyranny is wrong. Lack of representation is wrong. Abuse of persons is wrong. Abuse of granted power is wrong. They appealed to God, our Creator, Provider and Judge, the source of all law...

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one
People to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and
to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal stations to which
the laws of...God...entitle them...”

Through the Godly leadership of the clergy, between 1740 and 1775, it was the preachers who applied Biblical teachings, sermons based on the Old Testament and New Testament, to the times through their preaching on freedom, independence from human tyranny and the source of right government being from God. These preachers paid a terrible and cruel penalty for their freedom pulpits. Fifty Presbyterian churches were arsoned or defaced. Their sanctuaries were spread with loads of dirt and gravel and turned into riding stables. Grog shops replaced choir lofts. The pulpits, pews and Communion tables were burned for firewood. Churches were used for guard houses and prisons. The homes and libraries of Presbyterian preachers were set afire and every Bible that had the Psalms translated into Scottish were burned. The Presbyterians, preaching sermons based on Biblical teachings, remained strong in the Word of God.

All the colonels in the Colonial Army were Presbyterians except one. Half of all the soldiers and officers in the American Army were Presbyterians. In the most crucial battles, the majority of the Colonels were Presbyterian Elders who said: “We have been to worship. We have heard the true preaching of the Word of God. We have heard the cries of the scriptures. And now, we must be about God’s holy work of establishing justice, freedom and righteousness throughout the land.”

“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.....”

Of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, 12 were Presbyterians, over 21%, and one of them was the only clergy person to sign.....the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon.

Sometimes, a nation...needs to sit down...and weep...and sing their songs and remember
...under God.

In Psalm 139, the Jewish people could not sing. They were exiles. They, too, suffered from oppressive cruelty, insults and tyranny by those who ruled over them. They suffered. They were continually in tears. And they sat down by the irrigated beautiful land, by waters of Babylon and wept for their land, their nation, their freedom to worship. In their capture, they brought their worship instruments with them. They hung their harps on the poplar and willow trees, unable to sing their hymns any more. Mourning and grieving, under their personal trials, we see that sometimes a nation needs to sit down...and weep...and remember...their freedom, their worship, their towns, the sound of their children at play.

In the early Christian centuries, when men and women, whole families, were becoming Christians, they were given and taught the faith through lengthy instruction. They were told stories of those who had suffered and gone before them for the faith. Before they were allowed into the faith as Christians, before they were allowed to be submerged and feel cool waters of baptism, in the time of John the Baptist, new believers were led out to the graves of past Christian believers. And there, they were left. They sat down on mornings like this...and wept...and remembered. There, they placed fresh flowers and gave thanks at these sacred places.

Sometimes, a nation needs to sit down...and weep...and remember...and place fresh flowers on the land...that still holds...the great story. Amen.