

Mark 6:1-13

Happy fourth of July – Happy Independence Day!

You may remember that last year around the Fourth of July, I had a series of patriotic jokes and questions for Fr. Mark during my sermon. He isn't here this year since he's still in England but I found a good one for him this year and so I guess I'll have to wait for him to get back to ask him, "What ghost haunted King George III?" And then tell him, "The spirit of '76"! (I'm sure all you Hamilton fans especially appreciate that joke.)

Today, we celebrate our nation as Americans. And, as Christians, it is a good day to ask what God may be up to here in our country....what dream does God have for us in America? We may, if we are speaking from our various political perspectives, have different responses to that question. But I'd like to suggest that as people of faith, our answers may not be all that different after all.

And I say that even though we are all aware of how very divided our nation is right now – we all know that seeds of division have been sown deeply, that opinions about just about everything have been politicized, and that division continues to be sown in many different & various ways. It is this kind of division and conflict that led to a phone call I received late last January from a reporter from the San Diego Union Tribune. She wanted to interview me as a faith leader involved in interfaith work for her big front-page story and her question was a simple one: How does a nation heal? I admit I had a very hard time giving her a succinct answer, but I agreed with the need for civil discourse, while still pressing for justice tied to forgiveness. I believe part of God's dream for America is that we find healing.

But the division in our nation is so great, that the Church in America itself has become divided along political lines, even more so than in past decades. And while this distresses me, I also recognize that this is not a unique or new problem for the Church. In fact, when our church, the Anglican Church, was forming in England following the events of the reformation in the mid 1500's, its members were extremely divided between those who followed the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church and the pope versus those who aligned with the leadership of the Protestant movement and reformation. The division and hatred ran so deep that people, as we know, were being killed over it. The Church in England did something no one else was doing and decided against becoming fully aligned with either

the Protestants or the Catholics, but instead adopted, under Elizabeth I, the *via media*, or the "middle way" and took the best of both traditions to form what we now know as Anglicanism. And so to this day we are considered the one denomination that is both protestant and catholic historically and in practice. Anglicans were the one church that opted to include everyone, in that sense, whichever side of the political or theological divide they were on, within the embrace of Mother Church. It is part of the genius of Anglicanism and no other faith group has done this explicitly the way we have. And this approach continues today – we in the Episcopal Church not only refuse to force our members to hold a single set of opinions, we actually value the fact that we have a diversity of opinions. That doesn't mean we're never embroiled in controversy of course, people still divide up and split, but there is a deeply inclusive spirit within Anglicanism and the Episcopal Church because of it, that holds out the hope and value of uniting in the name of Christ regardless of the side of the equation we may be on. It is one of the things I love most deeply about our church and history.

This truth about our tradition was humorously enshrined by one of the more famous Episcopalians, Robin Williams (God bless his soul), who created the top 10 reasons to be an Episcopalian. His number 1 reason was this: "No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you."

So what, you may wonder, does this have to do with today's holiday and with our nation? I think it has a lot to do with it. Because we have an important role and calling as the Church to model community – to continue be the *via media* – the middle way- and in doing so, I believe we have the potential to bring healing to our nation. Rather than excluding those we disagree with along the political or theological spectrum, we have an in-built historical purpose and strategy for modeling unity in the midst of diversity within the same communion. In other words, we have a long history of learning to love both our neighbors and our enemies. And I don't know of any better way to combat hatred.

So what will this look like for us today? Let me first offer the disclaimer that modeling this kind of community does not mean that we sweep our differences of opinion under the rug or pretend they don't exist. This also doesn't mean that we cease to hold out the call to justice. We certainly must continue to do so and hold one another accountable on all sides.

But if we look at our epistle from today and hear the words of St. Paul who describes God saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Like St. Paul, we must start with embracing and admitting our weaknesses – our failures and our need for forgiveness and grace- as individuals, as the church, and as Americans. (That is also important for civil discourse.) This does not ultimately weaken us – it strengthens us because it makes room for God's power to be at work in and through those weaknesses, like the way the first and second steps of the 12 steps make room for God's power in the presence of weakness. And then we must extend that same forgiveness and grace to others....following and heeding Jesus' call upon our lives to loving sacrifice for the sake of others.

As the daughter of two veterans – my mother was a flight nurse for the Air National Guard and my father served in Vietnam in the Air Force – I know that people who join and serve in the military must be willing to die for their fellow Americans...whether those Americans are Democrat or Republican or anything else. It is truly a sacrificial calling. And those who follow Jesus are called to do the same for the sake of love...and to do so for all people.

And so for us, as people of faith seeking a way forward into healing ... the question is not who did you vote for – the question is -Do I love God with all my heart, with all my mind and with all my strength?

For us, as people of faith ... the question is not what is your opinion about this issue or that issue, the question is - Do I love my neighbor as myself?

For us, as people of faith ... the question is not who is a "real" American – the question is - Am I following in the footsteps of Jesus and willing to lay down my life for others, even those with whom I disagree?

For us as people of faith ... the question is not what news channel or media outlet or personality do you follow – the question is - Who do I follow and serve as my Lord and Savior?

More important than loving any notion we may have about "America" is whether or not we love our fellow Americans. (That's our starting point.) And more

important than any ideology about our country, is whether we are willing to sacrifice for our fellow country men and women.

Today, we bid God's blessings on America, land that we love, asking God's grace to be upon us to heal our every flaw. We are left with the question of whether we will heed the call to step up, to sacrifice, and be part of God's dream to heal our nation.

Amen.