

**“God Bless America!”**

**Sermon Preached by Rev. Lowell Nelson**

**American Lutheran Church of Sun City**

Grace and peace and love through our wonderful, powerful God, our amazing Savior, and the spiritual renewal of the Holy Spirit who captures this time in this place to hear the message of God through scripture. God bless America! It's a beautiful song and a plaintive plea. As Americans we have done well, haven't we? This country has been a tremendous force for good in the world. It is certainly needful for critique when we lose our way and our policies do not reflect who we are. We are people who believe in the truth, and that's kind of a simple way to describe America. The Declaration of Independence begins with "we hold these truths to be self-evident." Now I'll stop right there and say I think that they're self-evident because God discloses them. It goes on to say that "all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is not a *guarantee* of happiness but the freedom to be happy. We don't just *try* to be happy, but in meaningful aspects of life and liberty, we have the freedom to live and serve and love. Happiness is a beautiful byproduct.

And then to secure these rights, we are people who are governed, not by power that comes through government, but a government that derives their power from the consent of the governed. This is fundamental; this is who we are. It's about truth and unity that we live together for the support of this declaration. The Declaration ends with "...a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence...we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortune, and our sacred honor." It brings a tear to my eye because I think about the integrity of that commitment. Now, as the people of the United States we struggle on many policy issues and with complex systemic issues – health care, transportation, education, a whole variety of issues. We have a commitment to pledge our lives and our resources within a sacred, holy purpose, a sacred honor. We're in this together. Holy means 'set apart for special purpose;' secular means 'common things.' Yes, we have things in common for sure, but when God blesses America we live with integrity and a commitment to support one another; to live for the purpose of being together and being a force for good. That may seem a little idealistic sometimes, but it truly is a special dynamic. God bless America, and it's through us, that we are to be people of blessing.

We came from kind of a rag-tag collection of people. I don't mean to be insulting, but the British government uses the term we don't like anymore – 'king', that one person who would have authority over us. Psalm 123 says it this way: "Have mercy upon us O Lord. Have mercy." It is a psalm of ascent, said as people were marching up to Jerusalem for the high and holy festivals. "Because we've had too much of the scorn of the indolent rich and the derision of the proud," we are people who are common. We are the common man, the common woman looking for safety. There is no single person or system that treats us with contempt. We are those people, and we are certainly a blessing when we support one another in this regard.

There's an amazing fighting spirit about the American life, and that is that we have a sense of agency. That phrase means that we have the ability to make a move, that we can do things. Yes, there may be constraints certainly of time and energy and money, and there may be people competing against us in different ways. But we're in this together; we have the ability to be free to move in our action. But the freedom we have -- and as a Christ follower I invite you to look at it this way -- is that we understand that life will be difficult. Pursuit of happiness does not mean that we are happy to pursue only happiness. It means that in our pursuits of meaning and purpose, there will be challenges. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12) "I will not boast but I'm going to boast in my weakness." I love our country. And one of the things I love about our country is we're willing to pray where we need God's help. Of course, the United States demonstrates strength through military might, economic strength and others, but I love our country because we pray for where we are weak. We need God's loving mercy and the power of love is what we pray for. There are gaps everywhere that we pray and we admit our weaknesses, and God's power will help us in our weakness.

Paul said “I don’t want anybody to think better of me, what is seen in me or heard from me.” That is authenticity! That’s another part of America – we don’t like the talk; we like to see action. Paul prayed for the pain to be taken away (the thorn in the flesh), but the Lord in response said “My grace is sufficient for you. For power is made perfect in weakness.” God’s power ‘made perfect’ – meaning for a purpose, towards a teleological goal – is the redemption of this world. The power of Christ is so much more than our own power, unified when we pray for God’s blessing upon our country, for all the weakness of our efforts and for the challenges we have, our sin, for persecutions and calamities. As Paul said of Christ, “whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” When we have a life of prayer, and we’re willing to speak the truth, God blesses America, because then we’re open to the encouragement of God’s power, purpose and presence in our life. God bless America so that we can be a blessing for this whole world that God loves. God so loves this world!

In today’s Gospel, Jesus returned home and people were astounded. They took offense at Jesus because they were seeing God’s action revealed. I’ve just returned from a trip with my brother Jim to commemorate our parents’ final resting place, unable to do so last year with the pandemic. We visited all the places that Mom and Dad served as pastor. When we visited West Point, NE we bantered with a quilting group, asking if they remembered us. They bypassed me and said to Jim “you know, we really found you to be funny and full of life, even if your parents didn’t appreciate it.” It was hilarious to see his face because he didn’t expect them to remember him like that. It’s amazing that when you go back home, you’re just part of the community. You’re no better or no worse than them. Let’s just never treat Jesus that way. Yes, with comfort as our Redeemer and as our Savior, and yes as His friend, but never to diminish the power of what God can do to bless America through the love of Christ.

Sometimes the church has struggled, and so we are struggling now to regain deeds of power, not to diminish our Christian religion into a simple commodity. It’s our time. God bless American through the wonderful realization of God’s love in Christ. Jesus is sending out people with a light load: “Do not take anything for your journey. Take your staff and your sandals, one tunic but no bread, no bag, no money.” Oh my goodness, be dependent totally upon the reception of people! Our country has a lot of work to do to level the playing field, so that we are not one being held in contempt. As we read in Psalm 123, there is not the indolent rich or the derision of the proud (there’s always a pecking order, isn’t there?) This is the land of opportunity. God’s love is for all. He sent his people out, light, nimble, able to love and to serve, proclaiming that all should repent. In our modern day that means to turn to God, give up on that which is taking you away from God. Love one another – the simple message of the kingdom of God. It doesn’t take a lot of time or energy; it just takes that lightness of being, that sense of agency that you and I on this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend are part of this blessing called America. “God bless America” is not a demand; it is not simply a song to start off a Kiwanis meeting. “God bless America” is our plaintiff plea: Show mercy upon this land, Lord. We are truth tellers, and when we open ourselves to our weakness as a country we need your help, Lord. When we open ourselves to our weakness in our own life, we need help, Lord. When we open ourselves to the weakness in our community and work together without contempt, with tremendous regard we start bringing His kingdom. We start moving forward with this sense of agency.

This is my final encouragement for you: When we ask for God to bless America, that is you and me in this community of faith and the communities in which we live. We are called to be a blessing. And so I’m so thankful for this mid-year checkup point. We’re proclaiming the Gospel; we’re inviting others to join us in this faith community, and we’re seeking to be a blessing in what we say and what we do. Check yourself; take a look at the truth, the proclamation of the Gospel. Thanks for being part of this worship, inviting others. Who are you encouraging? -- your family and friends and neighbors?-- to go deeper in faith, and to join you online or in person, and being a blessing? Continue to utilize your gifts and time and talent to strengthen this church, to rebound it out into the world, so that the blessing of God’s love is for this country and for the world.

God bless America, land that we love. Stand beside her and guide her. Thank you, God for this weekend in which we are encouraged to live with the humbleness of knowing your mercy, with the action and the agency that we have, even in our weaknesses, calling upon your love. And with this light load of moving in the mission, do not diminish Jesus for His power and for His love, but move forward with strength and encouragement, two by two out into the world, and bring the Good News of God’s blessing. In Jesus’ name may you be strengthened. God bless America!