

Sermon – 4th Pentecost
Romans 7:1-13
July 2, 2017

God Bless America! To some a prayer imploring God “*to bless us above everyone else*” they think inappropriate. To others it’s a boast, as in “*God has blessed us above everyone else and for good reason – we are a better people, or at least a better nation.*” As we celebrate our nation’s independence this week, the phrase ‘*God Bless America*’ will be splashed on banners at parades, invoked in town square speeches and sung lustily at county fairs. If I hear the strains of Lee Greenwood’s “*Proud to be an American*” I’m for sure gonna get emotional too. There’s nothing wrong with that either. So long as we have countries, so long as God allows us to organize and govern ourselves that way, one should feel a pride of place and values.

‘*God Bless America land that we love, stand beside her and guide her*’ in no way implies we have forgotten the wider world God loves just as much as he loves us. Any person of goodwill and particularly of faith recognizes the groans of this world and ought to yearn for God to “*bless the whole world*” and by bless mean “*make it right again.*” To pray or sing “*God bless America*” reflectively is appropriate and needed so long as it impels us to seek the welfare of our country so our country can in turn contribute to the welfare of others.

In our lesson today from chapter 7 of Romans, the mending of the whole world is in mind. To get there Paul makes a rather extraordinary “leap” theologically and historically. Appealing to Jews, (“*those who know the law*”), Paul concedes Israel is a nation “*God had blessed.*” It was given the law and its insight into the mind of God. Paul knew his people considered the Covenant of Mount Sinai and the giving of the law to Moses the nation’s seminal event - their “July 4th.” Yet Paul leaps past that event and says the law is not evidence of blessing.

Borrowing from a legal situation – marriage – Paul says Israel is no longer “wed” to the Law of Moses and its commandments. In fact, he implies the law was never the foundation of the relationship Israel enjoyed with God anyway. God chose Israel when God chose Abraham, by grace. The Covenant through Moses was merely a legal contract denoting the terms of the relationship. All the law could do was show Israel what the marriage contract demanded of them. If the Jewish people could sing “*God bless Israel*” - and they often did - Paul says they could sing only because God was faithful to the promise he’d made to Abraham and his descendants – not because Abraham’s descendants were in any way a better people.

Above all what they could not do is sing “*God bless Israel*” because Israel was faithful to the Law of Moses – much less to God. They wanted to be, sure, but they failed to be. And if that “ginormous” leap of history was not enough, Paul goes even farther back in his argument, to the Garden of Eden. On the strength of that story Paul says that all the law can do is awaken sin, mainly our knowledge of sin, but paradoxically even a desire to keep on sinning. Adam and Eve knew God had forbidden a certain act – but they did it anyway. The commandment not to eat did not keep them from eating.

But after they did eat the commandment, Paul says, sprang into action and let them know something was terribly wrong – and not just with their dinner. The commandment brought death, precisely Paul’s argument. The commandment in Eden did all commandments can really do with regard to sin – show us how sinful it is. This is the extraordinary theological claim Paul makes in Romans 7 in addition to his historical one. Yet imagine the sound of this for Paul’s kin who “*knew the law*”! Paul had been spiritually raised in the Psalms – like all his fellow Jews- hymns and prayers that drip with the faith, history and theology of his people.

How many of you, when you were young learned and have in turn taught your own children to pray “*Come Lord Jesus, be our guest*” ...or “*Now I lay me down to sleep*” ...or “*Jesus loves me this I know?*” The young Jewish boy or girl would have sung or prayed Psalm 119 - passages like; “*Oh, how I love your law, it is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than all my enemies, for it is always with me*” and concluding “*thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*”

To which Paul now says “never mind”! Yes, and more than “never mind” – he says the law is dead – and you who loved it with it. Because now you know Jesus Christ, the law of God fulfilled and the love of God revealed. “*God bless Israel*” – indeed, but not because it was or ever can be any better at keeping the law than any other nation. But then that was never the point. The point for Israel and the point for you and I is if we love the law at all it is only because it shows us how much we depend on the grace of the lawgiver. If we follow the “golden rule” it’s only because we’ve been introduced by grace to the ruler. To love the law means to know you are a sinner in need of grace, and on that unpleasant reality you meditate day and night. But then you will be a person blessed, because God wants to fix the world, and curiously purposes to fix it through the very folks who in are responsible for breaking it – sinners like you and I.

So go ahead, with conviction and pride – but with humility too, say or sing “*God Bless America*” this week. Say it throughout the year in fact. But say it for the right reasons – not because of a founding document, a Declaration of Independence or a Constitution or Bill of Rights. As remarkable as they are we are no better at living up to them than any previous generation was or subsequent one will be. Say it because you acknowledge God chose to bless this land and you are by your prayer asking God to help you tend, govern and love it well.

In his stirring and patriotic song Lee Greenwood says he is proud to be an American where he knows he is free...and “*won’t forget the men who died and gave that right to me*”. Dear Christian, God has blessed you. You do well certainly to thank God he loved you enough to give you his commands, enormously good and important words. But you do even better to thank God they show you the Savior who died to set you free from the high and holy demands those commandments place upon you – and gave you the right to be called children of God and a citizen of heaven. AMEN