

Sermon Text for July 3, 2022

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Psalm 33:8-12, Nehemiah 9:6-8

“God and nations”

It is so good to be back home again, I mean it feels so good. On the trip with the group we were talking about our favorite cities in the world and then we talked about our least favorite and I mentioned Paris as mine, long story, things didn't go well for me in Paris, twice. But now after spending four days in Montreal, Paris has become a distant second. Our flight was cancelled in Montreal, we spent the night in the airport Saturday into Sunday, drove a round trip rental home on Sunday, drove back to Montreal on Monday and flew out again on Tuesday. At our hotel on Monday night it took us an hour to check in, we checked in and went out for dinner when we got back they had given our room to someone else with our stuff in the room, that took some time to get them out of our room. Let's just say I'm not a fan of Montreal.

On the other hand, our trip to Italy was probably one of the most significant I have ever done with a group. The cohesion in the group was exceptional, the chemistry can only be attributed to the Holy Spirit, the kids were amazing, as were the adults, which isn't always the case. Jesus came through clearly and the impact on those to whom we were ministering was palpable and clear. We spent four days with these kids without any of us able to speak a word of Italian and with the kids having even less English. By the end of our time together we didn't want to separate and the room was full of tears and songs that were sung over and over again. It was obvious to me that our youth understood then the meaning behind the experience we just had.

Then we went to Rome and we were able to walk into St. Peter's and as a whole the group just stopped and looked up and around. If you have never walked into St. Peter's it takes your breath away when you walk in, or at least it should. If it doesn't, something is wrong with you, not with the church. When we debriefed someone in the group said it was the moment that they felt the Holy Spirit most powerfully. See after the intense experiences that we have together to be able to see St. Peter's is supposed to put a cap on the experience and remind us of the presence of God in all the places where we have been and gone. It is also very humbling for us as Americans to think that this church was built hundreds of years before our country was even a nation, hundreds of years.

Happy birthday America, 346 years old. As Americans we carry a sense of exceptionalism about our country which is often tied to our faith. We do live in an exceptional

country, there is no doubt about that and you don't have to travel the world to understand that, but it does help. But when we tie our sense of exceptionalism as a country to our faith it creates within us a false god, idolatry even which is called nationalism, some would call it Christian nationalism, which places country above God. On this birthday of our nation it is important to learn the lessons of David in Psalm 33 and of the prophet Nehemiah who led the people of God back into the promised land and listen to the warning that they gave to all of us thousands of years ago. Let's read.

READ

After the tearful farewell to the kids there we sat eating our daily dose of cheese and ham and salami sandwiches which we had for every single lunch. Salvatore Cortini who is the director of the center where we served, a Protestant social center in tucked away in the chaotic confines of Naples, came to us and he was very visibly moved. He said to us, you brought the Gospel of Jesus here to this place. He went on and said, we have the Gospel and yet we are afraid to speak it and share it, but here you are unafraid and willing to sing it and teach it and shout it from the mountaintops. I reminded him that we were able to come and stay for a few days and leave, but they were living here and had to deal with the repercussions of a minority faith on a daily basis.

I know what it is like to live as the minority faith in a community in Italy and daily have to defend what you believe often at the risk of scorn and humiliation. It is very, very different than living here in America. But we saw God at work in the kids and they were able to teach us and our youth something that was significant. We can never go into a place and think that somehow we hold a monopoly on God and we are the ones who have to bring Jesus to a place that has known Jesus for longer than we have been a nation.

David said in Psalm 33:8 – Let all the earth fear him and stand in awe of him. David understood that God created all of the earth and he wanted all people all across the globe to love him and fear him and they do, not just those of us who decide to go on an overseas trip that we call a mission trip. In our second reading, in Nehemiah in chapter 9:6 he states very clearly You make all peoples and all things and you, God, give them life. As we celebrate the 346th birthday of our nation it is tempting to fall into an exceptionalism narrative that would even dare to say that our faith is the norm and it is that faith which needs to be exported across the seas. But what we read in our Scripture is that God is the God of nations, we would do well to remember that. These verses speak very clearly against any sense of Christian nationalism that would raise us above any of the nations that God has blessed and created long before we even existed.

How do we view Jesus and how is that connected to being an American? That's a tough question. Is your faith influenced by the fact that we are Americans? I have been all over the world and I have seen first hand the oldest communities of faith in the world, I have been to Egypt and have spoken with Ethiopians where the oldest communities faithfully serve a loving God while they live a very tenuous existence. I have been to Greece and Turkey and of course Italy where Jesus and Paul walked long before we were even a nation. All of this points to the obvious truth that God is a God of nations, not just of one, and if he were to be a God of one nation, I don't think he would choose ours.

As Christians we should have a slogan for our nation. Make America Humble. So let's look at our Scripture and see what we mean when we say that God is a God of nations. Psalm 33 we find the person that God actually anointed and put in power over his people, the Israelites, thousands of years ago. David speaks of a happy nation whose God is the Lord. Nehemiah, in our second Scripture, was leading the people of Israel, truly God's people, back to the promised land after generations of slavery in Babylon. Did you hear that? God's people were in slavery, the people that God chose had been in slavery for generations and now Nehemiah was leading them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

The first thing that God requires of the people before they could rebuild the temple and return to their homeland was a confession. This was the first step for any restoration that could take place. Each family was commanded to seek out and confess their own sins which involved following the idols that were present in the land where they were living while they were slaves. They weren't to lift up the sins of their neighbors or of those in a different political party or those who were ethnically different from them, but they were to point out their own sin before they could enter the promised land and start rebuilding.

What a great example for all of us. We are spending so much time in our public discourse in pointing out the sins of others and picking the low hanging fruit of what is wrong with other people, that we have completely forgotten to look at our own sin and how we are contributing to the division and the discord that is around us. As a nation each one of us needs to make America humble by being humble ourselves and not look to win just for the sake of winning and everything else can go to pot as a result.

We aren't the only nation that believes in the false god of nationalism and exceptionalism. Russia in its war against the Ukraine is following its own sense of manifest destiny. They believe that God has given them the land that is now Ukraine and the other areas around it and the church is praying for victory so that Russia can reclaim its old place of glory in

the world. Russia is crumbling right before our very eyes. It will be in a month or so when we see a power shift taking place similar to what we saw when the wall came down and the Soviet Union fell apart. It isn't just a military battle for them, but a spiritual one as well, which is what is going to make it so difficult for them to stop and turn around until their nation basically falls apart.

I believe this is a warning to us as well as Americans. What do we feel is our right, is our own manifest destiny, is our entitlement as a nation because we have somehow linked God's desire and wishes with our own desires and wishes? This is what we ought to confess and it has to be offered to God because we have to realize, David and Nehemiah remind us of this today, that God is a God of nations. God does choose people to carry out his will, but it must be his will. Abraham carried out his will, Jonah did not. Moses carried out his will, Aaron not so much, David was obedient, Manasseh not so much.

Happy birthday America, let's do better as we Make America Humble. Amen.