Pastor Jon's Sermon from July 4/5 Weekend. America's 250th Anniversary Reflection

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Happy 4th of July Weekend. Did you enjoy the fireworks last night? We enjoyed them in our backyard, but our dog, Badger, hid under the kitchen table. He was better this morning, however.

Today, I want to look at our scriptures in light of our country's 250th anniversary and how we as Christians can frame this day through the Lens of our faith in Christ. As I mentioned in my newsletter this week, I am thankful to live in this great country. I am thankful for my freedom. I am thankful to all who served our country or continue to serve to preserve our freedom. Can we take a moment to recognize anyone who served in one the branches of our military or is currently on active duty? Please stand if you are able or give a wave.

We live in a wonderful country, but do you agree, we still are a work in progress? America, in all its glory, has its flaws and difficult history, especially with how we treated the Native Americans and the period of slavery. Therefore, we need to enter this day with both a sense of gratitude and repentance.

Freedom is a gift, it is not something to be taken for granted or squandered. It is meant to be stewarded. We are set free from something for something.

I learned during my sabbatical a simple way to think about stewardship. It is connected to love. Thanks to Wartburg Seminary Professor Craig Nessan in a sermon on earth day down at Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison, he said, "We take care of things we love." How true is that. How simple is that? We take care of things we love. If we love this church, or love our country, or this beautiful earth, we will be good stewards of it. Everything we have is a gift from God, every human was created in the image and likeness of God, all plants and animals and bodies of water are God's gift to the world.

If we love those things, and we do, we will take care of them. When it comes to our country, if we love our country and what the framers of the constitution put forth in terms of equality and liberty and justice for all, we must fight for those freedoms for all people everywhere.

In our first lesson from the prophet Zechariah chapter 9, we see a nod to Palm/Passion Sunday in church. The prophet speaks a hopeful image of a new king that is coming into the world, triumphant and victorious, but in a new way. He will come humbly and riding in on a donkey. Instead of riding a war horse with all the pomp and circumstance, this new king will enter in a counter protest to the Roman Empire as a king of peace to the nations. People will shout Hosanna meaning Lord save us, and wave palm branches, branches of peace. The prophet says that, In him, war will be no more. His kingdom is a kingdom for all. As Christians, we read Jesus into this story. He is this new king, the messiah, the savior of the world. His reign will transcend man-made boundaries and fences we put up and the hierarchies that humans devise based on the color of skin, or religious background, or gender, or power differentials, Jesus declares these things wrong.

In Psalm 145, verse 9 sums it up this way. "Lord you are good to **all**, and your compassion is over all your works." Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom; and your dominion endures for all ages. As rulers come and go in this world, we have one kingdom that stands forever that we pledge our allegiance to. It is Our God who is Lord of all. And in this kingdom God will uphold all who fall and lifts up those who are bowed down.

This is such good news to me. Who here hasn't fallen lately, either physically or metaphorically? We all fall in some way, daily. Romans 3 says for we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Our daily choices can cause us or others to fall. We all struggle with something. Who here is feeling bowed down? Or like in our Gospel weary and carrying heavy burdens? It is God's mission and the church's mission is to lift you up and set you free. May God's word

and Holy Communion lift you up today and give you hope, forgiveness, and a new beginning.

In our Romans reading from Romans 7, the Apostle Paul names what a lot of us are thinking when we mess up. "I do not understand my own actions. For I don't do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I have a child that once said to me after getting in trouble, "Dad, I don't know why I do these things." Paul wants to do good, but the sin dwelling inside him causes him to do the opposite. We too know the things we struggle with and what we must change. Think about this, Paul, one of the greatest missionaries in the Christian church, a man of faith, wrestles with his own sinfulness and can't save himself. But the good news, Paul says, in verse 24 "Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Whether it's ourselves or the systems we live under, no one or nothing is perfect. Sin and evil always lie closely at hand. For Christians, as we struggle to navigate politics in our country and our world, we are reminded of Jesus words. In John 14, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." If you know my commandments, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

Finally, in our Gospel, Jesus is being mocked and rejected for welcoming tax collectors and sinners and eating with them. They don't understand how Jesus could be offering these "bad people" grace and a place at the table. To religious people at the time, you had to earn God's favor by how good you followed God's laws. The burden was on you. Now, Jesus shares that burden with us. In fact he took it upon himself on the cross.

For the church today, we must center ourselves on Jesus' teachings, his love for all people, his bent toward caring for the poor and little ones among us, and his mission to provide liberty and justice for all… How we live our civic life and do things like vote should reflect those teachings. May we look at every person in the world as someone created in the image and likeness of God who deserve freedom and

justice.  May thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  Amen.

*"Give me your tired, your poor,*
*Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*
*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*
*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,*
*I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Conclusion of the poem on the Statue of Liberty Pedestal by Emma Lazarus