

1 Timothy 2:1-4
Independence Day Weekend
July 4, 2021

No doubt many of you have plans for the rest of today. I understand there is a parade in town and a festival going on. Maybe you're having a cookout with family or neighbors and will watch fireworks later this evening or light a few firecrackers and sparklers of your own. It is good to resume those favorite activities since lots of events were shut down last year at this time.

Whether you have those plans or not, I'm glad you came here first. It shows you recognize God has a role in what our nation pauses to remember this day. There's an important activity for us to engage in that relates to Independence Day and that is

BEGIN YOUR FREEDOM CELEBRATION WITH PRAYER

- I. Freedom through our government
- II. Freedom through our Savior

Prayer is a valuable part of every day. Our "old" hymnal had a hymn that stated, "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath." It's what we do. Talking with God is a privilege of being his child. A few weeks ago a sermon text noted we are able to address him as "Abba," the same name Jesus used and a word showing the close and warm connection we have with him. It is a joy, like talking to your beloved.

The verses before us mention several different kinds of prayers. Requests take in specific needs we have. Prayer is the general term for talking with God. Intercessions are prayers offered in behalf of others and thanksgiving is praising God for his goodness and for his answers to our petitions.

Prayer is not an activity for selfishness. Often our time with God tends to sound like a child's Christmas wish list: "Gimme this and gimme that." Or our urgency sounds like we're dictating to him, "Lord, you just have to help me through this struggle, and right now." The Apostle Paul broadens our horizons as we approach the heavenly throne. He tells us to offer prayers for everyone. That includes our loved ones, of course, but also those who have experienced misfortune, the sick, those in need, and troubled ones. There are plenty of people we can remember in prayer. Jesus even taught us to pray for our enemies and for those who persecute us.

Our focus today is on the government. That includes all levels, "kings and all those in authority." For us that would include national and state leaders down to our local officials. We pray for them regardless of what form of government we live under. The reading we heard from Romans 13 spoke of "the authorities that exist," not just the ones we like or voted for. Paul likely lost his life under the Roman government that ruled much of the world in his day. It was not a democracy nor were its authorities Christians. Yet he prayed for them.

We offer thanksgiving for the government as it is God's representative to bring us blessings. The text mentioned in particular, "That we may live peaceful and quiet lives." When rulers maintain order we do not need to live in fear. We can work without hindrance and enjoy the fruits of our labors. We are safe against outside attacks and from criminal elements within our land. As a result, "We may live peaceful and quiet lives *in all godliness and holiness.*" That is our response to the blessings. When faith flourishes we live in reverent devotion to God and engage in kind actions to those around us. We strive to be upright and dutiful citizens. We are not perfect, as we have seen, and not everyone enjoys equal benefits, which is why the other part is needed, namely, intercession. Many challenges to a well-functioning government exist in our polarized society. Leaders cannot please everyone and the moods of people change. There are large problems to address. Pray for wisdom and guidance for our elected leaders. May God give them courage to make tough decisions, that they may do what is right, not just what is popular in the latest opinion polls.

God hears the prayers of his people. He answers in the best way, even when we can't see that it is true. There is much that we can see. Our land has been truly blessed. We see that as we view history from the humble beginning as colonies through forming a government, to surviving a civil war and becoming the leader of the free world. Reflect also on your personal life. As much as we at times like to grumble, we have a high standard of living. If you know anything about other lands, either through travel or reading, you recognize how well off we are in comparison with virtually every other land. We have reason to begin our freedom celebration with prayer. Pray and trust God to hear. Give thanks for our freedom and pray that we continue to enjoy it.

II.

Among the blessings we have in America is the freedom to do our work as a gathering of Christians. The last portion of the text deals with freedom through our Savior, which is the most important blessing that we have. We can exist under all kinds of government, even oppressive ones. We already noted how Paul, who penned these words to Timothy, did so. Christianity has survived active opposition

from the ruling bodies in many lands. Sometimes faith stands out all the more tenaciously in the face of trials. These results come because the gospel is not bound. The power of the almighty Lord is at work, with the Holy Spirit planting and strengthening faith through the Word.

The freedom comes through Jesus. The whole world was in captivity to sin. Satan promotes his ways as freedom, real living, but he's lying as always. When under sin you are unable to do anything else. Evil permeates one's mindset, priorities and activities. The record keeps piling up, one sin after another.

That depressing situation took in every single one of us. It's how we were born, with original sin; it's how we lived apart from God; it still plagues us and affects all our relationships. As a result, we deserve punishment. Misery in this life is proper, with death as the end, but not the final chapter: eternal horrors in hell are the final result as the Bible declares, "The wages of sin is death," separation from God and his goodness. That's genuine misery.

It is not what our heavenly Father desired for us, however. He had every right to demand it, but we hear instead that he "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." He seeks to prevent anyone from perishing. He acted on those feelings as he promised and sent his Son. Jesus entered our world as one of us, true man, while retaining his Godhead. He lived his entire life just opposite of what we did. He achieved perfect obedience to divine law and credited us with it.

In spite of his personal innocence he died as the payment for our sins, for he took the whole load on himself. He suffered the agonizing, costly price. It was sufficient, paying for every sin of every person who would ever walk this earth.

Our loving Lord brought this freedom from sin and its penalty to us. The Holy Spirit planted faith in Jesus Christ as Savior in our hearts through the means of grace, the gospel message which comes to us in God's Word and the sacraments of baptism and communion. For many of us it happened first in our baptism and then was nourished through continued hearing of the gospel in our homes and at church. That faith has continued to grow and mature throughout our lives. Testing by life's trials drove us deeper into the Word for comfort. In times of temptation we turned to Jesus for strength. May that growth continue!

Therefore we are at peace with God. The record is clean. We have been reconciled to God as the Second Lesson last Sunday pointed out. We enjoy freedom with a conscience cleansed from its burden of sin and strive to live in

freedom from sin's control as we serve our Savior with lives to his glory that follow his ways. We look forward to eternal freedom in heavenly glory, where sin won't mar our existence with its consequences nor even approach our minds. That is real, total freedom which no government can take away. Praise God for his marvelous gift!

The freedom which has been brought to us will also be brought to others through us. Remember that Paul said God wanted all people to be saved. That means the message needs to come to them. It is our privilege to bring it. We can share God's good news personally, using the freedom we have to speak it. Look for opportunities to do so.

There is a wider field than just to our fellow Americans. We work together as a congregation and church body to bring the gospel to more people than we have personal connections with. For many of the past months, in person work was hampered by concerns and restrictions relating to the pandemic. That's when technology became a more widely used tool. People we do not know, living around the globe, speaking other languages in far flung locations, connected with online broadcasts and resources that were shared by our synod and its churches. Learn of that work, give thanks for it and support it through your offerings and prayers for God's blessings on those efforts. In fact, begin your freedom celebration that way.

Fireworks and parades have a longstanding history in our Fourth of July observances. That's good, but don't let this aspect of prayer be missing. Pray to the God who loves you and answers your petitions with prayers for our nation. Storm his throne with prayers: prayers of thanks for blessings received and intercession for those who serve, that our land may continue to be blessed and most of all, that the good news of our Savior be proclaimed from sea to shining sea and beyond.