

Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I have long considered myself to be very fortunate because I have been born and raised on this country, I consider myself native to this country. I had one set of Grandparents who came through Ellis Island in the opening decades of the last century. As a matter of fact, you can go to Ellis Island and see their names on the wall that is there. For that matter, one of my sets of great-grandparents also came through Ellis Island and a whole bunch of other relatives that I am not so closely related to. But on that side of the family, we're relatively recent. But on the other side of my family, we have been in this country; we have been on this continent for a long time. My father is a veteran of the Second World War and while I have not served in the armed forces, many of my relatives have fought in the different conflicts that the United States has been involved in over the years. As a matter of fact, it goes all the way back to my ancestor, Nathaniel Brock who was born in – and fought in the Revolutionary War with – the Virginia Colonies. I've had ancestors on this continent since the early 1700's. Now I say all of this because as we are gathered together this morning, we gather together to worship God, but we're also remembering the significance, the country, the national significance of this weekend. I want to say that I am very glad and very proud to be a citizen of this country. I am glad to be an American.

Now I should also tell you that I was baptized at about nine months of age and differing from many of my peer groups, I kept attending church throughout grade school and high school and college, and continued long after that even before I began my active ministry as a youth director, and then as pastor. Church has always been very much a part of my life. Now I bore you with all these personal details, not because I am American, but to help us understand that I am an American and I am also Christian. But because I am a Christian does not automatically mean that I am an American, and because I am an American does NOT automatically mean that I am a Christian. They are not one in the same, they are not interchangeable. They are two separate identities. Now hopefully the one influences the other, I hope that my faith influences my citizenship and NOT the other way around.

A couple of days ago I heard on the morning news a commentator talking about the recent ruling of the Ten Commandments. This individual stated rather unequivocally that this is a Judea/Christian nation; and she based this on a recent poll that 80% of Americans say that they believe in God. And while that is all well and fine, first of all that doesn't mean that the God they believe in is Christ, and second of all, it also caused me to wonder about her grasp of history of the United States. Because as you may or may not be aware of many of the individuals crucial to the founding of our country, those who helped establish the underpinnings of our system which we still have thriving today would NOT label themselves as Christians. They thought Jesus was a great guy. They thought he was a very good teacher and a pretty good philosopher, but Son of God? Uh, no. They didn't go for that they were what is called Deists. They believed in God the Creator, they believe in a God who got everything started, but that God just kind of off in the background right now, not really getting involved in anything, kind of impotent. In this point of history that God is really no longer of any consequence. They believed in God, but not the Son. Thomas Jefferson, one of the best known Deists of his age, great thinker, and amazing author and accomplished architect, went so far as to take a pair of scissors to the gospel and cut out all of the things in the gospel that he felt were almost like a "fairy tale." And I wonder if any of those folks ever struggled, like Paul did, when Paul wrote, as we heard

this morning, I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. 7:15.

In his letter Paul is reminding us of the simple fact that all of us are sinful, we cannot do it, we cannot be good on our own. That is the opposite of the Deists way of thinking. A Deists way of thinking is to say that they can BY THEIR OWN POWER improve as a human being. It's the *Star Trek* mentality, we can "grow into being" GOOD people, we can do it ourselves we don't need God. That's not what Paul says: Back in Chapter Three of the letter to the Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" not those guys over there, not the people on this continent over here, all have sinned. In Chapter Six he reminds us that the wages of sin is death. And here in Chapter Seven we are reminded, "I do not do the good that I want to do, but I do the very thing that I hate."

One example, St. Augustine lived a long time ago, at one point before he became an acting and professing Christian, he and some buddies of his decided, you know there's some folks next to us that have a pear tree and they decided that they wanted to go and steel those pears. They didn't want to eat the pears, they didn't care about the pears. They wanted to go and steel the pears just for the sake of the excitement. As a matter of fact, they took the pears later and tossed them over to a pig. Augustine writes about this in his confessions. His account of this thievery reveals, I think a penetrating insight into our dilemma as human beings. While many of us want to blame our parents or our environment for our problems, Augustine admits that his sole motive was a love of wickedness: He enjoyed his disobedience.

A little bit more modern example, John Steinbeck writes in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, early on we meet a character named Jim Casy. Casy had been formerly a revivalist preacher, but he eventually gave up his ministry because he could no longer stand the hypocrisy of his own life. And in the novel Casy is talking to the main character Tom Joad, and he unburdens himself by making this confessions. "Tell you what - I used ta git the people jumpin' an' talkin' in tongues, an' glory-shoutin' till they just fell down an' passed out. An' I'd baptize to bring 'em back. An' then - you know what I'd do? I'd take one of them girls out in the grass an' I'd lay with her. Done it ever' time. Then I'd feel bad, an' I'd pray an' pray, but it didn't do no good. Come the nex' time, them an' me was full of the sperit, I'd do it again. It worried me till I couldn't get no sleep. Here I'd go preachin' and I'd say, "By gum this time I ain't gonna do it." And right while I said it, I knowed I was."

I do not do the good that I want to do. Because we do WANT to do good. Very few of us, I hope, really WANT to do evil. Very few of us I hope, WANT to go out and be bad, still though when we try on our own we mess us. We can't do it. We're just not able to. It is ONLY through Christ that we are freed from the obedience to the law. It only through the Christ that those Deists don't even acknowledge, it is only through Christ that we can be reconciled to God and through God then do the good.

So while we can be good citizens of our country: While we are CALLED to be good citizens of our country: We are, first and foremost, Believer in God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit. We are above all else followers of God Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. And for that, as Paul wrote, Thanks be go God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amen.

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