

## Under God

*A sermon taken from Acts 7 and preached on July 4, 2010 at Providence e United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.*

When the family gets together, we tell stories. Holidays have become holidays, holy days, because of some powerful story that is its genesis. I want to reflect on three stories, three overlapping stories for a few minutes on this Lord's Day, on this Independence Day, on this holiday weekend. It is important that we remember and re-tell these stories.

Summer is a time for, among other things, family reunions. A friend was sharing with me this week about his family reunion, a family of ten, African Americans who grew up in Arkansas. Some have become successful, by the world's standards; others have had difficult journeys. My friend's mother had several children close together, and one was taken home by an aunt and uncle. They later moved to California, and this son would be estranged, from then on, and he later died. They gathered recently to tell stories, some filled with joy, others with pain.

The remembrance of our stories has a name: history. There was a popular song of a decade or two ago, "Don't know much about history", and that would remain true today. A Marist College poll this week reported that 25% of Americans cannot name the country from which we declared our independence, and when we take the 18-29% age group, that number goes up to 40%.

So, it seems a good time to remember, today. Three stories.

First, an ancient story, about the first martyr, Stephen. Stephen is accused of speaking against the law and the temple, and he stands up to speak. The Christian movement is new and fresh, and seems to be taking on a life of its own. Yet it is causing concern among the powers that be. What do you have to say for yourself?, Stephen is asked by the authorities.

He responds by telling the history of his people, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Now this is a glorious history: Abraham, responding in his old age to the call of God, to go into a new land that God would show him. It was a great promise, and yet Abraham did not quite receive the benefits of it...his own sacrifices would make it possible for his descendents to enter into the Promised Land.

Then Stephen talks about Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, who were jealous of him. Nevertheless God was watching over him, and God brought him into a place of leadership in Pharaoh's kingdom. He governed all of Egypt, and when a famine came, he was able to help

his brothers. This is a part of the family story; one brother sent away, a painful part of the story, but then he is woven back into it, through the providence of God.

Then Moses: he had been rejected by his people, in the harsh time of wilderness the people complained about him, and yet God would use him to deliver the people from slavery to freedom. So our ancestors have rejected Joseph, the fulfillment of Abraham's promise and they have rejected Moses, and they have rejected Jesus. "*Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?*" Stephen puts in bluntly.

And so they put Stephen to death. More about his story later; a second story, more recent, the story of our country.

We gather to worship God on Sunday, the Lord's Day, and on July 4, Independence Day, and so these stories come together. Sunday is the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, and for a Christian is a remembrance of all that God has done for us through the grace of Jesus Christ. July 4 is about our nation's Declaration of Independence, when the United States declared their independence from Great Britain.

And so we have the coming together of God and country, faith and patriotism. Maybe you heard about the controversy, or maybe you saw the billboard: One nation indivisible. What was so stark about that? It had left out a phrase, "*under God*".

I asked you last Sunday to think about that phrase "under God". What does it mean to be one nation, under God? The one nation dimension, we confess, is difficult. We are defined by our regions, Bangor, Maine is very different than Mobile, Alabama, El Paso, Texas is not the same community as St. Paul, Minnesota. But we are one nation.

And we are, our pledge reminds us, "under God". I understand the secular sentiment to remove those words, added only in our recent past. The pledge was written by Frances Bellamy, a Baptist minister and a Christian socialist, in 1892. Louis Bowman, who lived fifty years later, would add the phrase "under God", taking it, he said, from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

We are one nation under God. Today we acknowledge this to be true, we confess this to be both a challenge and a comfort. It is a challenge to be one nation. We came to these shores, most of us, from some other place, or our ancestors did: Germany or Ireland, Poland or the Philippines, Liberia or Italy. We are a nation of immigrants. Some came willingly, to seek freedom from persecution. Some came willingly, to discover a land flowing with milk and honey. Some came unwillingly, in chains. Those who founded our nation were men and women of great courage. And as they signed, on the dotted line, they placed their lives at risk.

A part of our story is glorious and grand, and we celebrate it. A part of our national story is not so glorious and grand: the genocide of Native Americans, generations of slavery, even though our creed had stated that all men were created equal, the internment camps. This too is a part of our family story. Why do we tell it? Because it is true that when we do not remember our history we are doomed to repeat it.

I confess that I love the phrase "under God". It reminds me that we live finally not under a person, a president or a king, but under a higher power, under God. And this compels me to remember that "under God" contains both a blessing---and this would be the imagery of "America the Beautiful", about which we sing, "*the purple mountains majesty, the amber waves of grain, from sea to shining sea*", and our freedoms, "to assemble", not a freedom universally enjoyed across a number of countries, our freedom "to speak", and most importantly, our freedom to worship.

These are the blessings, but to live under God is also to be under the judgment and the justice. Every person, we read in the Book of Genesis, is created in the image of God, and so is endowed with rights, human rights. When we violate the human rights of our own citizens, we must remember that we are under the judgment of God.

And so I would ask a question: which groups, over the next ten, fifty, one hundred years, are the ones who will seek greater freedoms as citizens of our country? When we are talking and thinking about history, we take the long view, generations, as Stephen did, Abraham, Joseph, Moses. A later prophet of our own country, Martin Luther King, Jr., who was also killed for his convictions, remarked, "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*".

A third story, which prepares us for the ritual of this morning. There are many rituals related to Independence Day. There is one ritual around which we gather, and it is Holy Communion. **Do this in remembrance of me, Jesus said.** It was a ritual that had its roots in ancient practice, a dinner associated with freedom from slavery, the **Passover**. In this meal, Jesus said, he is our freedom.

Whenever we have communion, we use the words of the Great Thanksgiving. It tells the story of God's providence in history: the creation of the world, the deliverance of the people from slavery, the giving of the law, the sending of the prophets, and then the rejection of the prophets, and then the sending of Jesus, and then his death, but later his resurrection, and then the sending of the Holy Spirit.

In many ways these three stories flow together, like streams that become a great river. Stephen, the first Christian martyr; our nation's story; and the story of our family meal, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion.

These are our stories, ones that we remember with gratitude....and yet we do not gloss over the pain, the sacrifice, or the sin. And so these are stories that we also tell with great humility. We remember the martyrdom of Stephen. As he is being killed he says, about his torturers and to God in prayer, "**Do not hold this sin against them**", echoing the words of Jesus, also remembered by Luke the historian in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his gospel, "**Father, forgive them**".

We have this example of forgiveness, which is finally the greatest sacrifice and the path that families transform their pain and their sin on the way to the deeper reality of God's grace and providence. The hymn we love is actually one that speaks to our history:

*Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come  
Tis grace that brought me safe thus far  
And grace will lead me home.*

In the presence of abundant grace, we confess that often we do not know our own history, we confess that we take the sacrifices of great men and women of faith for granted, we confess that we mistake blessing for privilege. This has always been the great temptation for Israel, for the church, and for America.

The purpose of a holiday, today set in the higher context of the worship of God, is to pause, to rest, to reflect, to give thanks for the gifts and blessings that we enjoy, to remember the history that has made us who we are, and, in our freedom, to imagine the future to which God is calling all of us.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.