

Sunday: July 4, 2010

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10

Sermon: Taking Advantage of Opportunities

Call to Worship            adapted from Psalm 30

I will exalt you, O Lord

For you lifted me out of the depths...

O Lord my God, I called to you for help

And you healed me....

Sing to the Lord, you saints of his

For God's anger lasts only a moment

But God's favor lasts a lifetime.

To you, O Lord, I called;

To the Lord I cried in mercy.

Hear, O Lord and be merciful to me

O Lord, be my help.

O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.

Forever, I will give you thanks, O God.

Hymns. #561 My Country, 'Tis of Thee

#2268 As We Gather At Your Table

#564 O Beautiful for Spacious Skies

Prayer of Confession:

There is freedom in your Love, O Lord. Freedom that transcends the freedoms which the secular world offers. But we are captives to this world's definitions of freedom. We Somehow believe that we can change the hearts of mankind by our power and brawn. We want to bring in the Kingdom through our superior strength, but only You, O Lord have this kind of power. Forgive our headstrong nationalistic blundering. Teach us the truth of Christ's call to "love those that persecute us". On this, the birthday of our nation, give us a clear vision of a nation that is truly "under God" in actions and not just word. We pray in the name of Jesus who is Lord. Amen.

Sunday: July 4, 2010

Scripture: Galatians 6:1-10

Sermon: Taking Advantage of Opportunities

“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”

My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing  
Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims pride,  
From every mountain side, let freedom ring.

Dear Members and Friends of Altavista Presbyterian Church:

I am sitting here tonight on the banks of a pristine lake in the Ozark Mountains in North Central Arkansas. All around me the sounds of the evening are chirping and croaking. The gentle lapping of water rises to my ears as out across the lake the moon is beginning to duplicate itself on the surface of the water. It's not a full moon, but it is bright enough to cast a glow of half-light on the tree line across the lake and highlight the outline of the log cabin where Elaine and I have been sharing this week with our family.

All week I have been thinking about the message I believe God wants me to share with you on July 4<sup>th</sup>. For July 4<sup>th</sup>, our Nation's Birthday, falls on a Sunday, which does not happen very often. But this year, it does and I have felt for a long time that we need to celebrate this birthday not only with fireworks, but with thoughts about who we are as a nation. And what better place is there to do this but in Church.

Before I left for vacation, I picked out a passage in Galatians to which I felt that God was leading me. It is that passage which I will read for you during the worship, but the high point of the

passage is found in that 10<sup>th</sup> verse: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men...”

As I sit here on the lake’s edge, my mind wanders back to times when I was a boy sitting on the edge of the lake at Rock Enon, our Scout camp in Shenandoah Area Council. And I remember the lake at camp Sinoquippi in Pennsylvania where our Scout Master took the troop on numerous occasions. And I think about the time when Elaine and I climbed high up in the Rocky Mountains to Mirrow Lake, above Bolder Colorado. Each time I have had opportunity to separate myself from the furious pace of daily life and retreat to nature, I have gained a new perspective on life and on this wonderful country in which we live.

Sitting here now, like all the other times I have experienced the peace of the lake, I want to tell you how wonderfully blessed we are as a nation. We have places where we can go to experience the awesome power of God and to gain new insights into God’s creative genius. And we have the freedom to come and go and to enjoy these places. I think that is a great part of what the hymn means when it says: “From every mountain side, let freedom ring.”

You and I have abundant opportunities to let freedom ring in our own lives. Some day I want to sit on the rim of the Grand Canyon and experience another dimension of God’s power. When we celebrate the birthday of our nation, we are celebrating the freedom we have to come and go as we please. You and I do not have bar codes imprinted on us that authorize us to sit by this lake or climb that mountain, but exclude us from other places. We have a God given right to absorb all the beauty which God infused into His creation.

So, I sit here by the lake simply allowing the essence of God’s power to infuse itself into my body like some spiritual osmosis.

But there is something else that this freedom allows us to do and become. Galations gives a hint when it says: “So, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all men..”

It just occurred to me that when we say in the pledge to the flag, “One Nation, Under God” we most often miss the active nature of that phrase. As children we did not say that phrase. It was added by congress when I was a young teenager. I don’t remember many people objecting to putting that in the pledge, or stamping it on our coins, or printing it on our paper money. It seemed a good thing to do.

But as I sit here by this lake, it occurs to me that we need to translate the meaning of those words into actions in our lives, both as individuals and as a nation. What good does it do to say those words if our lives don’t live those words? Not much, right! So, Paul in his letter to the Galations encouraged them to take hold of the opportunities they had to put the love of Christ to work through the good works they did.

Well, that reminds me that in a few days I am going to leave this beautiful spot and head for home. It is back at home where the Christian life is lived to its fullest, and in Paul’s words, there is reason to believe that our Christian life, both as an individual and as a community of believers, and as a nation need to be reflected in the way we take hold of every opportunity to do good to all men.” Now that is a mouth full!

But it is a good way for us to celebrate our Nation’s Birthday. We date our birth as a nation from the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, Philadelphia, PA. Representatives from the various colonies signed the statement and pledged their sacred honor, and it was not too long before our Nation was established upon a written constitution and ten basic bills of rights. For 234 years we

have been amending and upgrading that constitution. Opportunities have come our way to rethink how we went about being a nation. And additions and changes have been made. We believe that every change represents a new opportunity to do good to all people.

Now, that is what it means to be a Christian Nation. To be a nation that leaps at opportunities to do good to all people. Opportunities have come our way to do good in hundreds of ways. Think of the millions of Irish who came to our shores when their own country could not feed them during the potato famine. And think of the millions who came when conditions in Italy and Sicily became unbearable. Then there were folks from Poland and Germany and Russia and Czechoslovakia. You name a country in the world and we can find thousands who have sought out the freedom of America to follow their dreams.

Other opportunities came our way to end tyranny around the world. WW I and WWII we fought to bring good to distressed nations. Even now, we are involved in conflicts around the world in an effort to “do good” to all the people of the world. That is why we need, on this our nation's birthday, to be very sure of our motives for becoming involved in these nations. If we are there to enhance our own stature as a Nation, then we are way off base. But if we truly want the best for the peoples of all nations, then there can be some justification for our involvement. Our birthday as a nation is a good time to take a long hard look at what we are doing as a nation and examining whether our behavior truly reflects that we are “One Nation Under God”.

Well, dear friends at Altavista. In a couple of days, Elaine and I will be flying back to Virginia. July 4<sup>th</sup> will be upon us and we will celebrate our Nation's Birthday with you. I can honestly say that this has been a restful week, but it has also been a week for much prayer and examination. We must never

stop examining ourselves.... As individuals .... And as a nation to determine if we are using “EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO DO GOOD.”

It is crucial that we examine our actions in this light at all times, because history has recorded that nations that have forgotten that they exist for the good of all people do not long last.

May God grant to us all a joyous and happy National Birthday.  
Amen.

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