

I had a [sermon](#) for you. A good one. Wrote it ten days ago. There are copies out in the vestibule. And honestly, I believe the sermon does a pretty good job of interpreting the text I just read. The long and short of it is this: Jesus reminds us to stop worrying about the particulars of our religion, specifically the mountains on which we worship God, and to instead be more focused on the presence, power, and possibilities of God in our midst. I hope you'll read it sometime this week. But today, I feel like I need to tell you more about what's on my own heart. What I have to say is more text-adjacent than text-relevant. I hope you'll allow this indulgence. Here goes.

I love Wendell Berry's poem the Peace of Wild Things.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

I spent this week at the beach. I didn't see a wood drake or a heron, but I did see a pelican swooping in waters that lapped my children with salty waves. And I did rest in the grace of the world, and I was free, and then I kept getting pinged with all these push notifications about a chaotic world.

And see, there's this tension. We methodically work our way through scriptures each week, and over the course of the year we tend to address a great deal of topics pertinent to the application of our faith. And yet we compete with a news cycle that wants to let somebody else set our agenda, tell us what's of the greatest significance to our lives. And we deal with this give and take of talking about volatile subjects, while at the same time trying not to set the whole world on fire, let alone our dinner tables. But I do worry about what my life and what my children's lives might mean, and this is just one of those weeks where I need to talk about the world around me. The upcoming holiday, the polarization of our world, silence and contentedness, etc.

Some years ago, long before I was here, and long before my predecessor, our congregation made a conscious decision, a compromise really, to display both the American and Christian flags within our sanctuary on three hallowed days: Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Veterans Day. The remainder of the year, the flags reside in the hallway adjacent to the sanctuary. The primary reason for this decision is the intent to honor the sacrifices of so many who have bravely and selflessly served our nation. Sacrifices for which we are all grateful. And while, yes, we do inherit as Baptists, a faith architecture that ardently proclaims the Lordship of Christ and the Separation of Church and State, the display of the flags in this manner is prudent. We don't live in a world of decimal point answers – we live in a messy world, where we always seek to balance the tension of our loyalties to God, Nation, Family, and Neighbor. So yes, yes, hear me, I believe we can be faithful, and divine, and complicated all at the same time.

But let me also say this. I interpret a secondary reason for the display of these flags. By displaying them, our congregation seeks to say something about their meaning that we wish for the broader world to

know. Therefore, as the pastor of this congregation, in the most hyper-partisan and hyper-polarized environment of my nearly-fifty years of existence, I feel an obligation to tell you what they mean to me. I have a responsibility to provoke a thoughtful response to their presence in this place in the same way I do for the cross, and the flame, and the Word.

So...I'm gonna seek to do that this morning. I have some thoughts, not so much in a linear fashion, but I promise I'll string them together for you as best I can.

Let me start by telling you something of my origin story.

Both of my grandfathers were first-generation Americans. My paternal great-grandparents were Russian-Jewish refugees fleeing the violence and persecution of Tzar Nicholas II. They entered Ellis Island sometime in the first decade of the 1900s. Traumatized by their experiences, they rarely spoke of their home country, Americanized their last name, the very one I inherited, to avoid additional persecution, and died in poverty before their three sons reached adulthood. The oldest son became a pharmacist, and raised my grandfather and his other brother, who both became physicians. My maternal great grandfather immigrated from Germany at about the same time, but for different reasons. He adored a beautiful girl, a good German Baptist, whose family was moving to America. "If you want to marry me," she said, "You'll have to move to America." And so he did. They made a life together in Port Arthur, Texas.

Both of my grandfathers served in WWII, obtained doctoral degrees from prestigious universities, and lived lives of service, one a physician in Atlanta, the other a minister and educator in various cities across the Southeast. My paternal grandfather came of age in New York City

during the Red Scare. His last name, his religion, and his degree from the City College of New York meant he had to go all the way to St. Louis to find a medical school willing to admit him. And he spent a career advocating, demanding even, exceptional care for every patient he treated. My maternal grandfather just happened to be a white clergyman in Birmingham in the early sixties. And he took very seriously King's call for self-reflection, confession, and repentance. And he wondered, daily, what his silence condoned. And he made a point of trading comfort for discomfort.

My grandfathers married two people who were somehow even more remarkable than them. And like their husbands, my grandmothers, one a nurse and the other an accomplished musician, rooted their lives in the service of others, always displaying empathy and sincere curiosity for their neighbors.

But here's what's really interesting to me. They were the descendants, I am the descendant, of people with the good fortune to arrive in our nation much earlier than the ancestors of their husbands, my grandfathers. More than two centuries ago, their ancestors, my ancestors, traveled the wagon roads to places like Illinois, and South Carolina, and North Carolina. The pigmentation, and the political and religious persuasions, and the home countries (England, and Scotland, and Ireland) of these ancestors were less disruptive to the status quo, and they could trace their lineage, at least supposedly, to people like Martha Washington and Daniel Boone, and even an explorer who navigated the Colorado River. And their America, my America, was easier, is easier, more fruitful, more privileged than most.

I'm reflecting some on origin, when I think about our flags. And life experience, too.

When I was in college, there was a film called *Amistad* that I found, still find, deeply moving. The film explores events that led to the end of the North American Slave Trade, specifically around the capture of the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad*, and the court case ultimately granting freedom to slaves kidnapped from Sierra Leone. In it, there's a poignant monologue by Anthony Hopkins who plays an aging John Quincy Adams. Advocating for the abolition of slavery, and lamenting the divisiveness and destruction sown by the institution, he says:

We understand now, we've been made to understand, and to embrace the understanding... that who we are **is** who we were. We desperately need your strength and wisdom to triumph over our fears, our prejudices, ourselves. Give us the courage to do what is right. And if it means civil war? Then let it come. And when it does, may it be, finally, the last battle of the American Revolution.

I believe this monologue paints a picture of our nation not just then, but in every age. We, or at least some, imagined a world, where everyone should be free. And yet there always seems to be a new disclaimer to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The American experience is so often elusive for the very ones who most need to be nourished by its promise of liberation. The tyranny of a king is exchanged for the tyranny of slavery, then Jim Crow, then environmental destruction and late-stage capitalism, then global isolationism and so on. We dream of that golden shore; we speak of that unbridled liberty; we claim to represent the very best of what humanity is called to be. Why then, do we so often settle for SO much less?

And that Great Commandment to love neighbor, and Micah's call of justice, mercy, and humility, you know the ones we love to put on cross-stitches, well, they just seem too hard to implement. Because where's the exclusiveness in inclusiveness; where's the gain in grace; where's the privilege in partnership; where's the power in a God we cannot shake at others? We say that love can heal, transform even, a wounded world. Why then, do we so often settle for that which is not love, that which is not life-giving?

I haven't delved into my family history too much. But I know my ancestors have been here for hundreds of years in places like the Carolinas, entrenched in the institutions that built our culture: churches, colleges, schools, banks, city councils, etc. I'm sure they were decent people, but I doubt they were vocal or urgent people. I wonder if theirs was the religion of politeness and order. I wonder if theirs was a God who didn't condone curiosity. I wonder if injustice was just the pill you had to swallow for the appearance of justice, and at least the worst stuff wasn't happening to you. But more than anything, I wonder if I am content with their contentedness. Further still, I wonder if I am content with my own contentedness.

Along with the cross, and the Bible, we have placed these two flags at the altar we deem to be the most sacred and hallowed in our city. In our allegiance, we pledge to one, the devotion to a kinship where all humankind is united in love and service to one another; we pledge to the other liberty and justice for all.

And yet, and yet, we are too often silent in a world full of Americans acting Unamerican and Christians following everyone but Jesus. Birthright citizenship, the very right given to my grandfathers, who to me, represent all that is good about these flags, such a birthright is now

in doubt; a record stock market condones a decade-long grift not to mention starving Gazans, nuclear nonsense, cruelty masked as efficiency, and assaults on free speech. None of this is normal. And none of this can be contented by people who claim to carry the banners of nation and faith.

I see these flags, and I am flooded with gratitude for the opportunity to know a God of boundless affection, and to live in a nation of boundless possibility. But I also see these flags, and I know, daily, that they are a call to confession and repentance. The blood spilled at Gettysburg and Antietam, Normandy and Selma are spilled in vein, each time our discomfort, our pride, our privilege silence our voices and stymie our advocacy for the unwon freedoms of others. The fellowship of bread and cup is too shallow, if it will not welcome others who worship God on different mountains, if it will not replicate the radical hospitality and goodness of the One we claim to follow.

And here's what I know Millbrook. 100 years ago, when women were finally securing the right to vote, *you* were already ordaining them as deacons, empowering them will all the agencies of discipleship. 60 years ago, when Wake County was drowning in the quicksand of segregation, *you* made it a point to formally integrate your worship for every race and creed. 40 years ago, when Fundamentalists were hijacking our denomination, obliterating the academic integrity of our esteemed seminaries, and marginalizing the voices of women and LBTQG neighbors, *you* carved out a safe space to be Church. Time after time, *you* have stood up for what's right, and what's just, and what's compassionate.

I love you, because you've found a way to keep loving one another AND to keep doing what's uncomfortable. And it's from this love, I, as your

The Other Sermon
Pentecost Three, 6/29/2025
Bob Stillerman
Luke 9:51-62



pastor beseech you: if we're gonna talk like Americans and talk like Christians, we better walk that walk.

I know we can. I know we will. And I know that the greatest American Revolution is yet to be revealed: that of our hearts, minds, soul, and spirits.

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.