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First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

“Shake the Dust”

I have fond memories of July 4th. Growing up there was a neighborhood parade that we went to every year and many years my family was in the parade. My Mom, in fact, helped to start it. It was the late 60s, and she felt that patriotism was in short supply, so she and other neighborhood women started the parade. In those early years kids would decorate their bikes, the high school marching band played, veterans marched in their uniforms (even if they were a little tight), and if families were ambitious enough they made floats. There are pictures of my family with our floats and we went all out. One year we turned the tractor into a covered wagon and my Mom sewed settlers costumes for all of us. In 1976 our costumes reflected the style of 1776. And when we all outgrew being in the parade my Mom often served as a judge. In 2018, on the 50th anniversary of the 1st parade, the planners invited my Mom back as an honorary grand marshal and she rode in a bright red Studebaker convertible at the front of the parade. Henry and I drove over to see it.

When we lived in Kirkwood MO our neighborhood had a parade. Apparently that parade started when someone stuck a handmade sign in her yard stating “Kids parade. 10am”. I’m told by someone who grew up in the neighborhood and lived there for 65 years that it was small the first year; just a few kids showed up on their bikes decorated with red, white and blue paper streamers. But through the years it grew so much in popularity that now whoever owns the house that hosted the 1st parade has to host the parade (it’s written into the contract) and they have to pass out popsicles afterwards. The years we attended there were probably about 200 kids and adults on bikes or walking and another couple hundred sitting in their front yards watching. And yes they had enough popsicles for everyone. Our kids were in that parade and Terry and I were even in it one year. We decorated our old tandem bike and put on our red, white and blue.

I bring all this up because I want you to know that I normally welcome with eagerness the 4th of July. But this year, I’m having a rough go of it. My patriotism

is in short supply. It seems like every other day I wake up to news which causes me to lament. Mass shootings; the hearings of the January 6 committee; the decision of the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*; and the court's other decisions like rolling back the EPA's ability to reduce carbon output or allowing citizens to carry a gun in self-defense. As those who are sent out to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near, it's hard for me to see how God's Kingdom has come near. There are days when I feel like a lamb in the midst of wolves. And when I attended a rally at the courthouse last Saturday and the woman handing out poster board remarked how tired she was of rallying because she'd been doing it for forty years, I knew exactly how she felt. Friends, for some of us our feet are not just dusty, they're caked with mud and it's getting harder and harder to shake it loose.

The story of Jesus sending the 70, the one we heard proclaimed earlier from Luke, gives us a rare window into what it looked like to follow Jesus in the first generation. Given that Jesus sent people out two by two and told them they're like lambs in the midst of wolves, we can reliably surmise that the audience was hostile so Jesus' followers would need companions for both encouragement and safety. We can also surmise that there's a sense of urgency to what he proclaims because he tells the 70 not to take a purse, bag or sandals, nor to greet anyone on the way. So they go forth equipped only with the gospel and the hope of hospitality. They are vulnerable, and they depend on those they meet along the way to meet their physical needs for shelter, food, and safety. They're encouraged to enjoy whatever is offered by their hosts, but they are not required to stay where they're not welcome.

So this was the context of Jesus' instructions, which to me doesn't feel much different than our current context. As one woman wrote:

"Human nature hasn't changed much in 2,000 years. We would do well to do our witness work with eyes wide open and expect rejection sooner rather than later. (Because there are those) who walk on by, ignoring those left for dead. Those who perpetuate patriarchy and protect their power by any means possible. Those who refuse to see the sin of white supremacy. Those who prop up leaders to save their own skins . . ." (*Karoline Lewis, "Dear Working Preacher", July 1, 2019*)

So what do we do, we who have been sent to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is near, which is to say a kingdom that has *good news* for the poor; that there *will be*

justice for the marginalized; and that there *will be* liberation from the yoke of oppression.

What do we do those of us who have been called to proclaim that the kingdom is near?

We shake the dust from our feet, no matter how caked on it is, and keep proclaiming that Jesus' message was a message of peace, liberation, and justice. Now, more than ever, it is important to speak up and act, especially because of our faith. As one person wrote:

“(It was) Christian Evangelicals (who) provided critical support and activism to overturn Roe. Evangelical Christians also provide strong support for open carry gun laws and seem to have been mesmerized by” a leader who is abusive and belligerent and utterly disregards basic Christian values such as integrity and compassion. “And so now is the time for Christians who come to very different conclusions to act. My Christian faith leads me to value and respect every woman’s right to affect what happens to her body and the God given autonomy to be in charge of her own life. My faith leads me to want to protect my neighbors, particularly the children, from harm and deadly violence. It is precisely my faith that leads me to argue for common sense gun safety laws such as a ban on the availability to citizens of weapons of war designed to kill quickly and efficiently. And it is my faith that leads me to be appalled by” someone who has such utter disregard for democracy that he’ll lie and cheat and cheer for someone to be hanged. (*“Find Our Voices”, John M. Buchanan, June 29, 2022*)

Friends, for those of us who call ourselves people of faith, how we understand God is literally – literally -- a matter of life and death these days, and is a formative factor in shaping foreign, legal, and economic policy. And I for one am not OK with there being only one Christian voice being proclaimed and heard. Theocracy masquerading as democracy is dangerous, for our country and our faith. When we wave the flag we also need to confess that there’s a dissonance between what we legislate and what we proclaim to believe.

All countries are imperfect and the U.S. is no exception. We have high ideals and often dismal realities. We respond too slowly to the challenges of the moral arc of history. We proclaim the equality of humankind but we legislate otherwise. We

have affirmed the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness while condemning some persons based on economics, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality.

As I reflect this year on July 4th, I'm reminded of something William Sloane Coffin once wrote. He wrote, "How do you love America? Don't say, 'My Country right or wrong.' That's like saying, 'My grandmother, drunk or sober'; it doesn't get you anywhere. Don't just salute the flag and don't burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean" (*Credo*).

Friends, an appropriate patriotism loves our country enough to be critical and to always hope and pray and work toward the goal of our nation living up to its own highest and most noble ideals and values. It is not right to say that the only true patriotism is one of affirmation, which only remembers and is grateful for all that is good about this country. A true patriotism also dissents because it loves this country and its highest ideals and values so much that it is willing to object and protest when those ideals and values are not honored.

So let's wash the flag and make it clean. Find a way, a cause or causes to express your faith and go to work. Give money, volunteer your time. Vote. Run for office if you're so inclined. Do what you can to strengthen the beloved community. Dare to pray and work for a bit of God's promised Kingdom of justice, peace, and compassion. And when it gets hard, which we've been told it will, shake the dust from your feet and move on, certain of the truth of gospel. And then come back the next day and testify to the truth once again. Have a sense of urgency. Take comfort that you're not alone, that you have partners in your mission, and welcome the hospitality that is offered. At the rally last Saturday someone who was distributing bottled water yelled out: "It's a long fight. Hydrate!"

So drink up. It's gonna take a while.

And let us sing with hope:

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee*

*And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!*

*O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare of freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!*

Amen.