"The Pride and Shame of America"
June 29, 2008
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Mark 7:1-8

Thank you for your presence here this morning. I appreciate the support you lend to me, especially this morning. Some of your fellow church members have helped me with the sermon this morning. I called several of our members last week and asked them for some input on today's sermon. Listen closely when we get to that part of the sermon.

The support I sense is not always present in some churches. I receive church papers from several churches. At times it is sad to read between the lines that things are not as they should be. There's conflict and turmoil. Sometimes the conflict is not so subtle. Recently I received a church paper and on the front page of the paper there was a picture of the Chancel Choir. It explained below the picture that immediately following the sermon that Sunday, the choir had sung an anthem, "I Shall Not Be Moved."

It is my prayer, my hope and my expectation that when we come to worship each Sunday we will be moved by God's presence in our midst. Sometimes that movement is God saying to us, "You need to get off your tail and go to work." It is my prayer always that we will be moved by God's presence when we come to worship.

Today is Freedom and Democracy Sunday in the church. As a part of our worship, we come to give thanks to God for the freedoms that we have. We honor the sacrifice of those who make that freedom possible. You might not remember a year ago, but last year on Freedom and Democracy Sunday, I shared with you the story of pulling up behind a car at a stoplight. The car had those yellow ribbons on the back of the car, but these ribbons were different. One of ribbons said, "Please pray for my grandson who is in the Air Force." Another ribbon said, "Please pray for my grandson who is in the Army." The third ribbon, you might remember said, "Please pray for my son who is in the Navy." This man had a son and two grandsons serving in the military. I said last year that I believe that might have been God's way of saying to me that out of all the cars I could have been behind in Tulsa at that stoplight, maybe it was more than coincidence that I pulled behind that particular car.

Just this last week, something similar happened; in fact, it was just two lights south of where I was last year. On my way to visit someone at the hospital, I pulled up behind a car. There was a ribbon on the back of the car. I had never seen this kind of ribbon before. It was a yellow ribbon. At the bottom of the ribbon where the ribbons crossed, there was a National Guard symbol, and the writing on the ribbon said, "Please pray for my husband." We don't know, I suppose how many young men and older, signed up for the National Guard, never realizing they would end up in Iraq. It is appropriate today that we honor their service.

I saw something else recently that I had not known about. Maybe some of you have. It

was a program on the History Channel called The “Alamo of the Pacific.” Do you know what the “Alamo of the Pacific” was? The “Alamo of the Pacific” was Wake Island. On the day after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese bombed Wake Island. They bombed it for several days and finally sent Japanese soldiers on to Wake Island to attack our marines who were stationed there. That first morning, our marines withstood the invasion. They won the battle; in part because they had heard that reinforcements were on the way—a task force from Pearl Harbor, an aircraft carrier, and several other ships that were carrying marine reinforcements to help them withstand the Japanese. When the commander of our task force heard about the invasion, however, he decided that it was too risky to go on to Wake Island. So he gave the command to turn the ships around. Our ships returned to Peal Harbor.

When the commander on Wake Island heard this news, he realized it was futile to keep fighting. There were thousands of Japanese soldiers, so he surrendered. After he surrendered, about 1600 Marines were taken prisoner. Two days later they were almost killed, a mass execution. The commander of the Japanese task force convinced the commander of the invasion group that it would be better to take them prisoner. They loaded these 1600 marines and took them to China were they served in slave labor camps for 3 ½ years until the end of the war. It is amazing that they survived the treatment they received. Most of them did, however, and in this program six of these survivors had returned to Wake Island. What was interesting to me about this group of six was that two of the men were from Oklahoma; one from Edmond and one from Blackwell. Somehow it made it more personal to see fellow Oklahomans who had gone through what they did. It is appropriate for us today to honor the sacrifice of all of these marines.

In other churches, however, on Freedom and Democracy Sunday, the celebration will be what I say is less than appropriate. In some churches it will be nothing short of a political rally. There will be no doubt left about which political party is best. There will be only good things said about our country. It will be a praise service, not for God, but for our country.

In other services, however, it will be at the other extreme. There will be nothing but negative words and criticism of our country and a not so subtle implication about which political party is superior.

I believe both of these extremes hurt both our faith and our country. One observer of our country said this, “America has suffered from unloving critics and uncritical lovers.” As citizens of two kingdoms we come today pledging allegiance to two flags: the American flag and the Christian flag. As persons of faith, our primary allegiance is always to God. This allegiance helps us to see our country with a discerning eye—everything that is good, as well as everything that is bad—what I call the pride and shame of America.

In preparation for the sermon, as I said earlier, I contacted some of your fellow church members this past week and asked them to share with me what they believe to be the pride and shame of our country. Here are some of their responses:

Pride: All people are allowed to be who they are; a goodness and kindness
Shame: Violence

Pride: People
Shame: People

Pride: Freedom and opportunity
Shame: Moral decay

Pride: Foreign aid
Shame: Slavery

Pride: Individual freedom
Shame: Prejudice against those who are different

Pride: Live wherever you want; free to go to college and church wherever you want; can own a gun; our heritage
Shame: Media have lowered our standards of morality

Pride: Generosity of its people.
Shame: Celebrity and athlete salaries

Pride: Our children
Shame: The abuse of our children

Pride: Equality for all people
Shame: Hypocrisy of those who claim to believe this, but then deny equality for all people

You might think about what you believe is the pride and shame of our country, then write it down on your bulletin and share it with me. I would be interested in hearing what you have to say.

Personally, I believe the shame of our country is our worship of false gods. Whether it is the god of materialism, hedonism, or what seems to be a god of violence. Did you hear the latest hit from the supremes; not the singing group—the Supreme Court? It was the ruling this last week about gun control. Let me tell you something about gun control. Everyone believes in gun control. Did you know that? Everyone believes in gun control—at least some kind of gun control. No one believes that criminals should be able to carry guns. No one believes that children should be able to carry guns and take them into the classroom.

We all believe in gun control to some extent, but because we worship the god of violence, we say, "We've got to have those guns." Then this creates not more security, but more fear. Then we worship the god of fear and then this god determines how we live our lives. You remember in the "good old days" it was the Russians. Now it's the fear of Al Qaeda, or for some, even the fear of our own government. It is shameful that we worship the false gods that we do in our country. We say "In God We Trust," but at the same time we want to keep the powder dry, don't we? I suppose if we can choose any words that can best

describe our country it would be the words of Jesus when he said, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” That is shameful.

But I see so much that is good about our country. First, and you might be surprised about this, just the vastness of our country. We take this for granted, but we shouldn’t. Let me give you an example, the country of Israel. In the state of Oklahoma we can understand something important about the country of Israel. The country of Israel is not the same size as the state of Oklahoma. The entire country of Israel is the same size as the Panhandle of Oklahoma. There is something about the vastness of our country that is good and even great.

More than geographical greatness is our goodness. It was Chesterton who said, “America is a country with a soul of a church.” We do say that all people are created equal. We all have the opportunity to do what we want, to accomplish what we want. Even more than this, I suppose, the pride of our country is the freedom that we take so for granted, freedom about which some in other countries only dream.

As people of faith, as Christians, we say true freedom comes from knowing Christ as Lord. You remember the words of the poet:

> In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea.
> With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me
> As he died to make men holy, let us live to make men free
> God’s truth is marching on.

If you would please, at this time, turn in your hymnals to page #723. Will you join with me know in praying this prayer?

Almighty God,
you have given us this good land as our heritage.
Make us always remember your generosity
and constantly do your will.
Bless our land with honest industry,
truthful education,
and an honorable way of life.
Save us from violence, discord, and confusion;
from pride and arrogance
and from every evil course of action.
Make us who came from many nations
with many different languages
a united people.
Defend our liberties and give those
whom we have entrusted with the authority of government
the spirit of wisdom,
that there might be justice and peace in our land.
When times are prosperous, let our hearts be thankful;
and in troubled times, do not let our trust in you fail.
We ask all this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.