



## *“The State of the Union”*

Al Bunis

**July 4, 2010**

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

It’s great to be back home to celebrate the 4th of July with you today. And I think, by any measure, Plymouth is a great place to celebrate our nation’s birthday. All you have to do is look at our wonderful collection of stained glass windows to see how steeped this place is in American history. Those windows are like an American history book.

But being a Congregational church, it’s not surprising that American history is so central to our identity. This is because Congregationalists...the original Puritans...they laid the ideological foundation for American democracy.

And on this 4th of July, it is this democracy and all of our related freedoms that we celebrate. We are most fortunate to live in this country.

There are so many places where “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is not even a pipe dream. The idea that all are “created equal” and that we have “inalienable rights”...many around the world would view such rhetoric as silly and naïve.

So yes, on this great holiday, we have much to be thankful for. The American experiment is 234 years old and going strong.

And we can look to Congregationalism as the initial spark for American democracy. It’s a familiar story.

In breaking away from the Church of England...these early Congregationalists were defending their right to worship as they wished...and in doing so, they came to a couple of revolutionary conclusions...conclusions that today we know as the Congregational Way...but in those days were revolutionary:

- First, that each individual church had the right to operate independent of any controlling authority...
- Second, that each church should operate democratically within its walls...“covenanting” that each member will have equal say in church matters.

This idea of covenant...an idea so central to the Biblical narrative...this is the idea on which Congregationalism...and American democracy, are both based. What the Puritans did was extend this Biblical notion of covenant to develop a system of church governance that mandated that all members of a church have equal say in all matters. We know this ideal well here at Plymouth. And it’s not hard to see how democracy grew from it.

In the Bible, the sacred covenant is between God and humankind...beginning with Noah and God...then Abraham and God...and then the Israelites and God.

But this new take on covenant established a sacred bond *between* humans...still with God as a party to the covenant...but a covenant *between* humans. This was a radical extension of the idea of sacred covenant.

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But while the Puritans...with their notoriously intolerant theocracy in Massachusetts... were far from perfect...the seeds were firmly planted for what has become an American love affair with the idea of democracy and individual freedoms.

And being a classic Congregational church...covenant is, of course, central to our identity here at Plymouth. Just for starters, we all repeat the original Salem Covenant in unison with our new members twice a year.

And not surprisingly, our reading from Jeremiah is all about covenant...in this case, the prophet Jeremiah's New Covenant.

In this passage, Jeremiah is, in a sense, updating and reinterpreting the original covenant between the Israelite people and the God they called Yahweh...and the covenant needed updating because the relationship between God and his chosen people was not going well.

The Book of Jeremiah was composed in Jerusalem during the desperate final days before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians...which ultimately led to the devastating destruction of the Temple of Solomon.

Like most of Biblical prophets...Jeremiah spent most of his time scolding his fellow people of Jerusalem for having lost their way...for having forgotten the basics of Scriptural law...of their covenant with Yahweh...basic stuff like helping the poor and worshipping Yahweh alone.

Jeremiah was warning that God's protection...which was part of the covenant...was being withdrawn...because the people had not lived up to their part of the bargain...that the covenant was broken.

But Jeremiah didn't only deliver bad news. Jeremiah also held out a vision of hope for the future. And that is the point of our text...that all wasn't lost because the covenant was broken.

Jeremiah holds out the hopeful idea of a New Covenant...one that will be written on their hearts...embedded in their very fiber.

Jeremiah is reminding the beleaguered people that their God...Yahweh...would forgive their countless blasphemies...forget their iniquities...in order to renew the relationship. What the prophet is essentially saying is that even though the covenant had been broken...that the relationship had been breached...it hadn't gone away. Jeremiah is essentially saying that the covenant can be renewed.

It's an optimistic message...in the midst of a terrible time. And our reading from Luke is similarly optimistic during a terrible time. With his dying breath, Jesus asks God to forgive us. "Forgive them Father for they know not what they do." Talk about a breach of relationship...God's son is killed...and yet the relationship is renewed...through the one who is killed.

So when we cut through it, our Biblical message today is reasonably simple: covenantal relationships are resilient. They can be broken...but they can also be renewed.

And this idea of covenantal resilience...this idea seems directly relevant as we think about America.

When we consider our national heritage...I think it's fair to say that our founding national covenant...the starting point for our relationship as citizens...that it's a combination of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. These are core to our national identity...they define our shared passion for our democracy and our freedoms...our mutual commitment to give each other a say.

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And yet, I think it's also pretty obvious that we haven't always lived out these ideals. Or to say it differently, these covenants have been broken many times and in many ways. Some even say the covenant was born broken.

"All men are created equal"...we are endowed by our Creator with "certain inalienable rights..." We broke those from the outset. Slavery...Our treatment of Native Americans...limited voting rights. It took us a while...and a pretty bloody history...to live into that part of the covenant. And in some ways, we're still working on it.

And yet what I am so proud of...is that we do seem able to change...to learn from our mistakes. It seems we have never seen our democracy as set in stone. We have truly seen it as the "Great American Experiment."

On this day when we celebrate our shared passion for freedom and democracy...I am perhaps most thankful for our resilience....that we seem able to learn from our mistakes.

And so, in a sense, what we are celebrating today is covenant...the resilience of covenant. Whether in our national covenant...or in the Biblical covenant...or even in our own Plymouth Covenant...we can see that while the relationships are fragile...the covenant itself isn't. Covenants can be broken...in fact they almost always are at some point...but they can be renewed.

About a month ago, I had the honor of doing my first wedding. I was filling in for the senior pastor at the church in New Jersey where I did my internship.

And I will never forget that day. To be able to help a young couple celebrate their love...and their love was obvious. To help them enter into the covenant of marriage...it was a special day...for the bride and groom of course...but also for me.

The couple was so happy...yes nervous...but so eager to be married. It was moving to see how the groom lit up when the bride was coming down the aisle. He seemed nervous up to that point...and then he just beamed...and then to see how they stared into each other's eyes and supported each other through the ceremony. It was truly touching to witness...truly touching to be part of.

This felt like the beginnings of a strong partnership. When I pronounced them husband and wife, they kissed...and then the bride spontaneously let out a loud yelp...raising her fist in excitement.

Since it was my first wedding, the senior pastor suggested I borrow his liturgy...including his homily. While I made tweaks, I decided to mostly go with his tried and true script.

The homily was about the inevitable changes that come with marriage....sort of a reminder that it's not always bliss in successful marriages.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian...the great Christian...who courageously spent his last years in a Nazi jail...he wrote a wedding sermon from his jail cell for his niece and her fiancée. My homily quoted his sermon. Bonhoeffer offers the following wisdom: "It is not your love that sustains the marriage...but the marriage that sustains your love."

Bonhoeffer's point seems to be that while the marital bliss comes and goes, the glue that holds a marriage together is the loyalty derived through the promise. It's the glue that helps relationships get through the inevitable disagreements.

And speaking from personal experience, Bonhoeffer's idea seems so true to me. Even though Lynn isn't here this morning, I don't think she would mind me admitting that our marriage hasn't always been pure bliss...and that we've even had a few disagreements over the years. But having just celebrated our 23rd anniversary last Sunday...celebrating our own sacred covenant...I'm happy to report that the state of the union is still strong.

In thinking about today's holiday, I see meaningful parallels between the way we think about marriage and the way we think about our country...and really the way we think about any enduring relationship. To begin with, patriotism is a sort of passion.

And along those lines, while it may seem old fashioned to say...I have to admit that I really do love my country. While far from perfect, I really do feel that we have it right in many ways...this even though I disagree with so many of my fellow citizens on so many issues.

Our political disagreements these days seem so full of vitriol. But from what I know of our history...it's been that way throughout. And the funny thing is that we usually seem to get through it...and actually often come out better on the other end...which is kind of like an enduring marriage.

And like any enduring marriage or relationship, not only is it OK to disagree...it's actually necessary to air out disagreement...to hear what others have to say. And sometimes, those disagreements can reach the breaking point. Civil wars come in all shapes and sizes...and sometimes civil wars need to happen. And, of course, not all relationships are meant to be.

But the point is that we cannot fear disagreement...and we don't have to assume a relationship is dead because a promise has been broken. We have to be careful to avoid the temptation to write off others. We know this from today's Scripture. God modeled this for us. God shows us that it is possible to start over...and over...again...and again.

And, being human, we all inevitably forget that in our relationships...civic or interpersonal...that we should try, as much as possible, to remain open...to, as much as we can, seek to forgive breaches. Of course, this is not always doable...God knows this...but we do indeed have a divine example...encouraging us in that direction.

Carrying our comparison of country and marriage just a bit further, I think Bonhoeffer's advice to his niece can be directly applied to our nation's ability to rebound from poisonous debate. Let me slightly rephrase his advice: "It's not our love of country that sustains our democratic covenant, but our democratic covenant that sustains our love of country."

In other words, it's our core shared values...our passion for democracy and freedom that is embedded in the Declaration of Independence...this is what sustains our love of America. Like any solid marriage, this is what makes the state of our union not only strong...but more importantly, also resilient.

And this resilience is grounded in each citizen's shared commitment to give each other a say in what happens...even as we fight tooth and nail over who gets the most say.

Our union is grounded in our mutual agreement that we have the inalienable right to pursue our own agendas...imperfect though our own agendas may be.

We agreed to these mutual freedoms 234 years ago...and just like any good marriage...any good relationship...even though we so often agree to disagree...in fact, precisely because we are allowed to disagree...the agreement remains intact. And we thank God for that. Happy 4th of July!

Amen.

Go now with God  
Be not tempted to stay in the safety of known places  
Be not tempted to go only in your own time

Chose to go with God  
Elect not to go alone

Go in the faith that there is no valley so low  
No wilderness so vast  
No passage so crooked  
That God is not already there waiting to be with you  
Amen

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