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## *I Want to Observe Dependence Day!*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
Observing Independence Day in the United States of America**

Blessings, Blessings, Blessings!

Blessings to you, and to you, and to you!

*Asalamu Aleikum! Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu*

God blesses each of you! God Bless America! God blesses all of America on this Fourth of July weekend.

Oh my. Yes! This is where I usually am, on the Fourth of July, in Atlanta. I am right here alongside Peachtree Road, blessing the magnificent Peachtree Road Race! What a glorious wonder that race is! Of course, it's a true race for only some of the participants: the elite runners, and those racing for a T-shirt, and those racing against themselves, their previous times and records. For others, the race, or run, or walk, or gathering, or procession, is an event. It is an event of peace and good will and celebration.

When I bless the Road Race every year, I am blessing ALL of America: the fast and the slow, the good and the bad, the black and the white and the brown and the colorful and the non-colorful, the gay and the straight, and the LGBTQ, those who get it, and those who don't get it. If God is really going to bless America, God is not going to leave anyone out. That's what makes blessing the Peachtree Road Race so glorious. God is blessing everyone.

Atlanta is not having the Peachtree Road Race on the Fourth of July this year. We all know why. But it will return. God bless its return!

Even without the fun and wonderful Road Race, I still stand here. I still want to bless America, all of America, on this Independence Day Weekend. We desperately need it. And, I still have something to say, about Independence Day in the United States of America in this time.

Today, in the Christian Church, we rightly give thanks for this country's liberty and freedom. I salute Independence Day in this land! We call the Fourth of July "Independence Day," but I do not want to speak today about independence at all. Instead, I want to speak about dependence. I want to talk about much we need each other, how dependent we are on each other. I want to observe Dependence Day.

Over two hundred years after our war of independence from Great Britain, I propose that it is not independence that holds this country together, but, rather, dependence. (In fact, it may be our various efforts of "independence" are what threaten to pull our country apart!)

In particular, I give thanks today for two realities upon which we are rightly dependent, not independent. First, we are rightly dependent upon God. The character of this country has always included various sorts of religious faith; it was G.K. Chesterton who said that "America is a nation with the soul of a church."

Our friend, Jon Meacham, the former managing editor of *Newsweek* magazine (and a faithful Episcopalian), some years ago wrote a careful and hopeful book describing our country's religion. It was titled *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. Read it this Fourth of July weekend! He mentions Chesterton and faith in some truly Anglican ways!

Toward the end of his book, Meacham writes one short sentence which is worth memorizing. "Democracy is easy; republicanism is hard." (page 247). What he means is that electing people and deciding legislative issues simply by majority vote is rather easy. But electing people and deciding legislative issues according to a constitution is quite difficult. Our country is not just a democracy. We are a constitutional republic. We are dependent, if you will, upon a constitution.

I am thankful for these two dependencies of our country. First, a healthy United States realizes its dependence upon God. That dependence should always lead to humility, not arrogance. It should always lead to charity and care, not haughtiness and provincial isolation. It should always lead to peace, and not violence.

Likewise, secondly, a healthy United States realizes our dependence upon the constitution, a constitution whose first amendment provides the guiding religious genius of this land: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The separation of church and state has come to mean much more than that, but the principle is worth remembering and giving thanks for, year after year.

When European settlers gathered in this world three centuries ago, their firm religious sentiments were also solidly embedded in their political structures. It was unthinkable that a state –or a country-- could exist without some accompanying established religion.

To this land, these folks also brought their religious faith. They were Anglican, German Lutheran, Swiss and Dutch Reformed, Anabaptist, Quaker, Jewish, and Puritan. Let us never forget when we celebrate the Fourth of July in our churches, the startling and sometimes conflicting diversity of religious expression in the early American colonies. When charters were granted to various individuals and companies in the colonies, those charters usually stipulated what sort of religious expression was to be allowed. This was true in Western Europe, and it was to be true in the new colonies.

Thus, religious passions often became the drivers of political division. We would do well in these days of religious political partisanship to heed what our ancestors learned.

Consider the old Roman Catholic - Protestant antagonisms. Think of the Anglicans in Virginia and South Carolina who made church-going compulsory and who used state tax money for the upkeep of the Anglican Church (on second thought, maybe we in the Episcopal Church wouldn't mind this!). In Virginia, one could vote only if he were Anglican. Maryland, on the other hand, was established as a Roman Catholic colony.

The Massachusetts and Plymouth Bay colonies were founded by groups expressly hostile to the established religion; those Puritans prohibited the presence of the Church of England.

The Baptists, too, were separating from the Church of England; but they were distrusted, in turn, by the Puritans. Roger Williams, banished from both Plymouth and Salem, ended up in Rhode Island with all sorts of other free thinkers, some so free and so strange that it was said, "If a man had lost his religion, he would be sure to find it in some Rhode Island village."

Meanwhile, Presbyterians were emigrating from Scotland and Ireland. New York was strictly a Dutch Reformed colony. They resented the Quakers, who therefore, went to Southern New Jersey and, of course, to Pennsylvania. George Washington could tolerate the Roman Catholics, but not the Quakers – who professed pacifism (Washington feared that they were Tories).

Sadly, the new country's entire economy benefited from the slave trade. The slave trade was not just a "southern" thing; northern industrialists were making their living from that trade, too. That slave trade, too, was often justified in the name of religion. It is one of the great miracles of religion that African-Americans actually found a source of salvation within the white man's religion; they took the slavery story of the Exodus –the flight to freedom and into the promised land –and they made it theirs. Such is the way of God. God will not let salvation be confined to only the powerful few.

The United States, then, has had its share of divisive and oppressive history, often justified by religion. But something new happened in this country, something for which I give gracious thanks this week. The founders of our country figured out a way to separate church and state in a way that gave enormous freedom to each.

Martin Marty, the great church historian, calls the principle of the separation of church and state as large a revolution as was the War of Independence: "The statesmen founders of the United States... set out to convince churchly citizens that religion was larger than their own sects. ...They [separated] what both tribal and

church-minded people had kept bound together of thousands of years. No shots were fired, but in their own ways these achievements amounted to an American revolution as much as did the War of Independence.” (Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, p. 155).

Today, we have a long way to go. Today, the plurality of various religions, and the plurality of so much earnest opinion, presents us with another challenge. But the genius of American separation of church and state gives us a noble platform from which to meet that challenge. We can do it. If our early American religious communities found a way to live above their differences, perhaps we can teach the world to live peaceably above those differences, too. It is no longer just the Protestants and the Roman Catholics who must learn to trust one another, but now it is the Christians and the Jews and the Moslems and the Hindus, too, and the atheists.

And, more acutely, it is the Republicans and the Democrats, the conservatives and the progressives, the capitalists and the laborers, and the police and the protesters. Remember last week’s sermon, by Brother Thee Smith, about how affinities can get in the way of beloved community? Many of us treat our affinity passions as if they were our religious passions. No. Still, our country is based on a principle, a genius, that is different from either affinity or religion.

In the United States today, even in these recent months of frustration and fear and protest, we enjoy a tremendous gift: the principle of the separation of church and state. By the time of the Declaration of Independence, which we remember this weekend, Americans knew first-hand what religious *intolerance* was like. They knew what happened when a party or a state or a country tried to impose its own particular brand of Christianity, or its particular brand of passion, on its people. Such behavior did not lead to liberty, freedom, and independence. It led to dissension, oppression, and even death.

Part of the great American experiment, then, promulgated in the United States Constitution, was the *dis*-establishment of religion. No one religion, nor one group's form of religion, nor one group's form of passion, whatever it is, would be the standard of government in this new land. We are dependent upon that constitutional principle.

This decision was a beautiful one, for it allowed the brilliant diversity of American religion, and American passion, to flourish. The process was influenced, I might add, by some specifically *non*-religious principles, principles of liberty and freedom which emerged from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and even Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and others hearkened back to the classics of Greece and Rome for guidance.

That is why our dollar bill, even though it says "In God we trust," also includes the Great Seal of the United States with these two sayings: *Novus Ordo Seclorum* "A New Order of the Ages," and *Annuit Coeptis*, "He has favored our undertakings." Both these sayings come from the Roman poet Virgil, who lived way before the time of Christ.

As a Christian in these United States of America, I give thanks today for the separation of church and state, the separation of passion and government, a separation which allows both religion and government to be truly free.

And I give thanks that we are, indeed, under God, whether folks acknowledge it or not! I don't mind that the phrase "under God," was added to the pledge of allegiance in only in the past seventy years, in 1954.

As Christians, of course, our primary allegiance is always to God; and, as Americans, our allegiance is to the Constitution. I give thanks for both on this day. We depend upon love God and love of neighbor. We all, really and truly, need each other.

Blessings to you, America! God bless America! We have liberation and oppression, both, in our history. We have brilliance in our history, and we have stupidity. We are holy, and we are sinful. But God wants to bless us. Blessings to you, America. God bless you.

AMEN.

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