

## *The People of Our Country*

John McCain, Senator, statesman, Naval hero, a man currently in the fight of his life against cancer, was, as many of you know, a Prisoner of War for five and a half years during the Viet Nam war. He has shared some of what happened in those years, and this is one of the stories he tells.

In the early years of his imprisonment, the prisoners of war were kept in solitary confinement or sometimes with one or two others. But in 1971 their captors moved them into larger rooms, sharing them with 10, up to 30 other prisoners.

One of the prisoners sharing that room with John McCain was a man named Mike Christian. Mike was a country guy from rural Alabama, who enlisted in the Navy at seventeen, eventually became a flying officer and was shot down and imprisoned in 1967. As John says, "Mike had a keen and deep appreciation for the opportunities this country – and our military – provide for people who want to work and succeed."

At one point in their imprisonment, their captors allowed the prisoners to receive packages from home. In one of the packages were some handkerchiefs and clothing. Well, Mike Christian fashioned himself a sewing needle out of a piece of bamboo, took a piece of white cloth and red cloth and over a period of a couple of months, sewed the American flag on the inside of his shirt.

Every afternoon, after they had their bowl of soup, McCain said, they would hang that shirt on the wall and together recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and it became the most important and meaningful moment of their day.

Well, one day, the Vietnamese discovered Mike's shirt with the flag sown in it and removed it. That evening, they returned, took Mike Christian out of the cell, and beat him severely. Then they opened the door of the cell and threw him back in.

John McCain said he was in bad shape, and they tried their best to take care of him in that little room illuminated only by four dimly lit light bulbs located in each of the corners.

After a while, they all tried to go to sleep on the concrete slab that was their bed, and McCain says, as he did he looked in one corner of the room and there sat Mike Christian with that bamboo needle and a piece of white cloth and red cloth. With his eyes nearly swollen shut from the beating, he was sewing another American flag.

In our best moments, that is who we are, that is who we Americans are. Brave, courageous, hope-filled - committed to freedom, liberty and justice for all.

We Americans come from all corners of the world, are many hued, speak many languages, have many gifts. From the ones who were here from the beginning – Native Americans – to the founding fathers and mothers who framed who we would be as a nation – to the frontier men and women who went westward – to people who survived wars and depression – to the Greatest Generation – and all of us who would follow. We Americans are not perfect, but we are blessed.

May we, like Mike Christian, be the best Americans we can be, however God calls each of us to do that.

Let us pray: God of us all, we give you thanks for the people who have been and are a part of this country. In our best moments, we are people who see possibilities, who serve selflessly, who care for the common good. We remember especially all those in our country who serve – military, fire, and police personnel; teachers and leaders; doctors, nurses and other medical personnel; government leaders and so many more. And we lift a special prayer for the children of this country – not just our future, but our present. Pour your Spirit upon all Americans, O God, that we might be caring, committed and courageous, and go where you lead us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Song – Forward Through the Ages

## *The Gifts God Has Given Us*

One of the reasons I love American history so much, and the reason I majored in it at college, is that it is so filled with amazing stories of gifted people who have done incredible things. From early on, people like Benjamin Franklin and his wonderful inventions, to Lewis and Clark and their magnificent adventures, to Susan B. Anthony and her fight for equal rights, and Neil Armstrong, the first to walk on the moon. Musicians like John Philip Sousa whose marches still stir our hearts, to Frank Sinatra whose sound still makes us swoon, to Carrie Underwood and Beyonce who top the charts today. Amazing athletes who over our country's history have inspired us and excited us – Babe Ruth, Jesse Owens, Serena Williams, Jack Nicklaus, and of course, Carson Wentz and Nick Foles (you know I had to include them!) Some Americans have helped us laugh – Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, and Jerry Seinfeld; and some have made us lose ourselves in a story because of their incredible acting, like Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks. Visionaries like Henry Ford and Bill Gates changed the way we do things. And poets like Maya Angelou and Robert Frost swept us away with their way with words.

And while we remember all of those people and the incredible gifts those Americans were given by God, let us not forget that every American is gifted, every one of us is gifted in some way, and together, using our gifts, we can do some mighty great things.

So thank God for the gifts He has poured into each of us. May we use those gifts as Americans, for our country and for the world.

Let us pray: We thank you, O God, for the countless gifts you have bestowed upon millions and millions of people in this country over its history. We pray that you will continue to pour your Spirit upon all who call this country home that they may use their gifts to live full and faithful lives. For we pray in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Song – Take My Life and Let It Be

## *Who We Are as a Nation*

Our nation was built on the principle that every person is endowed with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We are a nation built on a commitment to freedom – freedom to worship, freedom to speak, freedom to assemble, freedom to dream dreams and see visions.

We are a nation, especially in times of trouble, with heart. We dig deep and reach out and care for those who are hurting.

We are a nation with strong people and strong beliefs, and sometimes that means that we butt heads, but the beauty of our democracy is that that's okay – every one has a voice.

President Ronald Reagan once said this about our country. He likened it to the Biblical city Jesus talked about, set on a hill for all to see. Here are some of his words:

“In my mind, it was a tall, proud city, built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.”

He finished with this: “After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”

May we be committed to do all that we can to be that city set on a hill, to be a country of goodness and grace, of strength and courage, of leadership and love.

Let us pray: From the very beginning O God, our country was built around principles of freedom. Cause us to remember that every day Lord, especially in this time of temptation when sides line up against each other, and some are more focused on what they can get for themselves than caring for the common good. Give us the courage we need to stand up for what is right and good. Help us stay committed to living as Jesus commanded us, to let our light shine, to be a city set on a hill, to show the way for others. Help us to know, as he showed us that humility and a care for others is a show of strength. Lord, help us to not only talk the talk,

but to walk the walk and do the hard work of freedom. In Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.

Song – Jesu, Jesu

## *This Land*

Two clergy friends of mine, Vicky and Bo Gordy-Stith, recently experienced a great loss in their life with the death of one of their sons. After the funeral, they took off in a trailer on a long-planned trip across the country and back. They had no idea how healing the trip would be, but they are blogging about it all along the way, and the words they're writing and the inspiration they're receiving from this beautiful land is amazing.

It is a beautiful country, is it not? I took one of those quizzes on Facebook once, and discovered that I have visited 39 of the 50 states, so I still have eleven to see, but I can tell you, from my experience, this is a beautiful, beautiful country.

Think of it –

The mighty Mississippi

The Golden Gate Bridge

Iowa farm lands

The Rocky Coast of Maine

New York, Chicago, Los Angeles

The lakes of Minnesota

The Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park

The Appalachian Trail

The Chesapeake Bay

Oh, and you could name so much more!

And of all people, think how blessed we are – living here in Elkton. Just think about it – travel one hour and you get to either Philadelphia or Baltimore. Travel two hours – New York or Washington DC. Two hours in other directions will get you to the beach or the mountains. How perfect is that?

This land, these United States – a gift of beauty from the hand of God. May we not be so busy that we don't see the beauty all around us, and enjoy the gifts in all of these places. And may we not be so selfish that we fail to care for the land, that it might be here for all the generations to come.

Let us pray: God of Creation, we give you thanks for the beauty of our land. From sea to shining sea, there are sights that take our breath away. May we cherish it always, and may we do all in our power to preserve and protect it. Cause all of us to listen for ways we can care for the land and give us the courage and commitment then to do them. Help us to go forth from this place today with new eyes, taking the time to see the beauty around us, and whispering prayers of thanksgiving to you, the giver of these great gifts. Amen.

Song – America the Beautiful

## *Our Present and Our Future*

I think it is safe to say that we live in troubled times right now in our country. We are a divided people, and too often these days, we are not being the best we can be. Public discourse has gotten ugly, we have trouble listening to each other, it is sad.

Too often, decisions are being made that are self-centered and selfish, and a care for the common good seems to be no more. Doors are being closed rather than opened, people are being hurt rather than helped, instead of all for one, and one for all, sometimes it seems it's every person for himself or herself.

That's not who our country is, that's not who we were formed to be. Too many tears are being shed over the seemingly callous indifference of those in power for those who are most vulnerable. There is so much frustration over the inability of people to work together, to cross aisles of political party or any other aisles that separate people. And it seems that we're so fixated on hearing from talking heads who say what we want to hear that we have stopped listening to anyone else, and stopped trying to understand the other side of an argument.

We are better than this, and more than that, we are followers of One who calls us to love our neighbors and even love those with whom we disagree.

In my weakest moments, when I turn off the television in tears, because I've heard a child crying out for a parent, or I see another news report of a horrific shooting like the one in Annapolis the other day, or I hear yet again of another move to block something or other by one political party or another, and I despair of where our country is and where it's going, I stop and pray and remember that with God all things are possible. Change can happen, our country can heal, we can move in a direction where all are treated equally and cared for equally, because with God there is always a way.

So no matter what we might see if we turn on the TV today or look at the headlines, as people of faith we know that all things are possible. And while solutions to our national problems seem almost impossible at times, we need to remember that what we do as individual citizens matters. We can choose to listen to each other, we can agree to disagree without demeaning or disparaging each other, we can join hands to care for those in need, we can volunteer in a hundred different ways, and we can pray.

And so, we do that right now.



Let us pray: God of the ages, we know from the Biblical witness that all countries go through times of trial and struggle. We also know from the Biblical witness that you can and have made a way for them to get through those times and thrive again. May we not be so distressed by news reports and Facebook posts that we give up hope, because of all people, we who call ourselves Christians put our trust in you and a better tomorrow. So fill us with your Spirit Lord that we may be Americans who want the best for all people and who do all that we can for peace and justice for all. Amen.

Song – God of the Ages