

“OF THEE I SING, FOR THEE I PRAY”

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

July 3, 2011

Service of Thanksgiving and Prayer for Our Nation

I Timothy 2:1-4

Mark 14:32-42

The other day I picked up a magazine and on the cover was a picture of President Obama, and as I looked at it, I was amazed at how gray his hair has gotten since he's been in office. (Now, I'm one to talk about being gray!) But seriously, you can see the toll that being President has taken on him. We see it with every president, don't we? They age right before our eyes under the enormous weight of holding the office of one of the most powerful persons in the world.

On this day when we remember and give thanks for our wonderful nation, I want us to spend a few moments thinking about our President and all who serve in any way in our country. From sea to shining sea, there are thousands and thousands and thousands of people who offer their lives in public service as mayors, commissioners, state legislators, United States Senators and Congress persons, judges, justices of courts at all levels, cabinet secretaries, ambassadors - well, the list goes on and on. And all of them, at the core, are doing what they are doing because, first and foremost, they have chosen to serve their fellow citizens.

And for all of them, that service comes at a price. It means sacrifice of time, it means putting themselves in the public eye, it means opening themselves up to every Tom, Dick and Harry having an opinion of them, and oftentimes those persons feeling very free to share negative opinions about them publicly.

Public service is not easy, but it is oh so necessary to democracy. So we need to listen to what Paul said in his letter to Timothy, a part of which we heard in today's Epistle lesson. We need to, indeed, lift our prayers and intercessions are all who are in positions of authority and responsibility. They need our prayers. They rely on them.

From the very beginning of our country, our leaders have spoken about the importance of prayer. As a matter of fact, in the early days of the democracy, John Adams said to his wife Abigail, that he knew that, for all the days to come, the 4th of July would be such an important day in our country, that it should be celebrated, (and I quote) “as a day of deliverance with solemn acts of devotion to God.” (On-line, Sermons from Seattle, “Good Government in Rome and America,” Edward

Markquart)

Benjamin Franklin made sure that our nation would be one of prayer when he wrote that every session of Congress should begin with prayer.

Years and years later, during a particularly trying time in our nation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt took to the airwaves and led the nation in prayer. It was June 7, 1944, and his speech began like this: “My fellow Americans, last night when I spoke with you about the fall of Rome, I knew at that moment that troops of the United States and our Allies were crossing the Channel in another and greater operation. It has come to pass with success thus far. And so, in this poignant hour, I ask you to join with me in prayer.” And then he prayed a beautiful, heartfelt prayer that was heard by millions across the nation for all who would defend our country. (On-line, “Will You Pray with Me? Robert S. Rudolph)

Years later, another President, Jimmy Carter, looking back on his time in office wrote this: “Knowing how many lives could be affected by my decisions, I felt a special need for wisdom and a sense of God’s presence. Although I had a lot of advice from all sides, it was a lonely job during times of crisis or when the issues were especially controversial. I prayed more during those four years than at any other time in my life, just asking for God’s guidance in making the right decisions on behalf of the American people.” (Jimmy Carter, *Living Faith*, p.97)

Even today, and even in the midst of a great divide over separation of church and state, our leaders still pray and still talk about the power of prayer in their lives and in the life of our country. At a recent prayer breakfast, President Obama said that every morning he prays that God will give him the strength to meet the challenges of his office. As he spoke to the crowd, he said, “My prayer this morning is that we might see the face of God each and every day, as we go through the hustle and bustle of our lives, that we rise above the here and now and kneel before the eternal. Remember that ‘those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.’”

His morning prayer, “when I wait on the Lord” (he said) is to ask the Lord for strength, and each night, he asks God to forgive his sins and to look after his family and the nation. And then he finished with this: “I must work and sacrifice and serve to see these prayers answered, but I always say these prayers knowing the act of prayer is a source of strength, a reminder that our time on earth is not about us . . .” (On-line, “Obama’s Prayer: To Walk Closer with God”, Cathy Lynn Grossman)

Prayer is so important, and praying for our leaders is so very important, especially in this day and age. I hope you remember to pray for our leaders. I

hope we're not like the disciples of Jesus in this morning's Gospel lesson - who fell asleep instead of staying with Jesus and praying for Him. You can feel how disappointed Jesus is every time he goes back to find them all asleep. He really needed their support and they let him down.

Friends, our leaders really need our support, they really need our prayers. May we not fall asleep on them, may we not let them down, by not praying for them. There may not be a whole lot we can do to help them out, the one thing we can do for sure, is pray for them. Let's not let the only words being said about politicians and public servants be negative ones, let our words be ones uttered in prayer.

So let us make John Adams' dream in 1776 a reality today and tomorrow, as we make these two days, days of devotion for our country and its leaders. Let us stop in the midst of our hot dogs, hamburgers and firecrackers to give God thanks for this beautiful country of ours - so majestic from sea to shining sea. Let us give Him thanks for the millions of people who live here - people of all ages, all shapes, all sizes, all colors, all languages. Let us thank Him for keeping us strong all these years, and let us pray that we will still know how to balance strength with humility.

And let us pray for all who serve - for those who put their lives in harm's way for us and our safety, those who serve in police and fire departments, those who serve in the military; for those who serve in political offices at every level; for those who serve on courts; for all who serve, all our leaders at every level in our government.

And let us pray for the weakest members in our country, that we might find ways to help them and make them strong.

Friends, we are so very blessed to be living in this country - the United States of America - the land where anything is possible, where freedom rings out every day! May we, every single day, give God thanks for that, and pray for our country and its leaders - every single day.

I close with part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's prayer that he offered on the radio in June of 1944. He said this:

"Many people have urged that I call the nation into a single day of special prayer. But because the road is long and the desire is great, I ask that our people devote themselves in a continuance of prayer. As we rise to each new day, and again when each day is spent, let words of prayer be on our lips, invoking Thy Help, O Lord, to our efforts." (On-line, "Will You Pray with Me?" Robert S. Rudolph)

Friends, the road is still long and the desire still great. So may we rise to each new day and when each day is spent, may words of prayer for our country and its leaders be on our lips. May it be so.

Amen.