

“ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION”

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Elkton United Methodist Church

July 5, 2015

Service of Thanksgiving for the Nation

Luke 20:20-26

Have you ever gotten caught in a trap? If you haven't, let me invite you to drive down Rt. 13 through lower Delaware even just a shade over the speed limit, and I guarantee that you'll find yourself in a trap – a speed trap! I am convinced that some of those towns down there – like Felton, Harrington, Bridgeville and others – make most of their budgets from speeding tickets!

And you know what? It's easy to get trapped. I mean you're riding along nice as you please, going about your business, and it's so easy for your speed to creep up without you taking much notice of it, and bam, here come the flashing lights and siren! Really, you don't even have to leave Elkton – there are a couple of places around here where people have been known to have gotten caught in speed traps – maybe even some of you – places like coming down Red Hill into Elkton on Main Street, or going out Whitehall Road toward Route 40, or how about Blue Ball Road?

Traps, they come in all shapes and sizes, all different varieties. Did you notice that there was a trap set in this morning's Gospel lesson? And did you notice who the intended victim was? Jesus himself!

Let's revisit the passage. Jesus was speaking, and among those in the crowd were spies, sent by his enemies to keep watch over him and gather evidence against him. Now, you might remember that there were always rumors swirling around about Jesus being an enemy of the state, that he was some insurrectionist bound and determined to defeat the emperor. So to substantiate their suspicions, Jesus' enemies sent these spies into the crowd that was gathered to listen to Jesus, and when the time came for questions, they were more than ready to try and trap him into saying something that could get him arrested.

Oh, they were pretty clever, because, did you notice they started out by complementing him? “Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach,” and so on, but then they set the trap. “Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Now they had him, or so they thought. I'm sure they thought he was about to launch into a sermon on how people should worship God and God alone, and not be loyal to the government. Instead, Jesus said, “Show me a coin. Whose head is on the coin?” “The emperor's.” “Well then,” Jesus said, “give to the emperor the things that are his, and to God the things that are God's.”

Jesus failed to fall into their trap, not only because he was onto their game, but also because he meant what he said. There was no conflict for him in people being responsible citizens and people of faith.

We've come a long way since then. Since this country began, it has been filled with people who are both responsible citizens and people of faith at the same time. I think we face a different trap these days – the trap of negativity. Way too often these days we focus on the wrong question, which is “What is wrong with our country?” instead of the right one, which is “What is right and good about our country?”

Don't believe me? Take a look at the editorials in the newspaper, flip the channels through the talk shows on TV, or better yet, scroll through Facebook. You won't believe some of the things you'll see there. Sometimes they upset me so much I just turn off the computer.

Some of the negative things that are posted about our government, our society, our leaders are horrible. You would think that not a single thing is going right these days. How is that helpful? How is it helpful, for instance, to post a picture of our first lady wearing casual clothes and ask people to agree that it's shameful and previous first ladies have been so much classier? Or how was it helpful to post pictures of a previous president and question his intelligence? How is any of that helpful? Why do we do that? Why are we so tempted toward negativity?

And oh how easy it is to get trapped into that. How easy it is to just click “like” on Facebook to one of those posts and join the crowd of naysayers, lamenting the thought that America used to be better. How easy it is to jump on the bandwagon of negativity, to dwell on the “what's wrong with our country?” question instead of the right one, “What's right with our country?”

That's one of the reasons I like to have this service every year – to pull us out of that trap, and take the opportunity to celebrate this great country of ours. Oh, there's so much to lift up – first and foremost the fact that we have the freedom to be right here where we are – in worship. How many people in the world would give anything, anything, to be able to worship but they can't for fear of their lives? They literally could lose their life if they tried to worship Jesus. Oh, we should never take for granted this opportunity we have – this freedom to worship. It's what our forefathers and foremothers wanted when they came to this country, and it's a blessing we still have today.

How about education? Everyone in this country has access to education, from cradle to grave. We dare not take that for granted either, because there are so many people in the world who don't, and especially girls. I just saw Malala

Yousafzai on television again the other night speaking about education for girls in the world. In so many places around the globe, girls are denied access to education, they are not deemed worthy. Not so in our country, another reason to celebrate its greatness.

I could go on and on. I haven't even said anything about the beauty and variety of the United States. The beauty of the land – from sea to shining sea – from the oceans to the mountains; from tiny villages to great, huge cities; from cold Alaska to warm, sunny Florida; to the beauty of the people – all colors, languages, shapes and sizes.

And what people we have in this country – lots and lots of great people, and even some amazing ones! Like Dan Price, a multi-millionaire, who last year decided to take a huge pay cut (from a million dollars to \$70,000) in order to give all of his employees huge pay raises (each of them will now make \$70,000 as well) – because it was the right thing to do. He has more than enough, he didn't need to wallow in lavish living, and he wanted them to have great lives too. So he gave it up – gave up a vast amount of money for the people who worked for him. People like Dan Price make America great!

I'm in the middle of reading David McCullough's book about the Wright brothers, and it's astonishing. Orville and Wilbur Wright were incredible. They were smart and hard-working and kept at a task others felt was impossible. Yet, they did it – in their home made airplane at Kitty Hawk. They are in a long line of gifted inventors that fill the pages of history in our country, even today. Think about it – somebody in this country made it possible for you to carry a computer in your hand in your smartphone. Amazing, smart, gifted and adventuresome inventors – our country is filled with them!

And if you want to talk about the great people of our country right now, you need look no further than to the people of Charleston, South Carolina and the way they handled that horrible shooting of 9 people in Mother Emmanuel AME Church a couple of weeks ago. No rioting, no screams for retribution, instead peaceful, worshipful, and forgiving. They showed us what the best of America looks like.

I encourage you today and every day, actually, to ask the right question, "What's good about our country?" and not fall into the trap of negativity. It's too easy to do that, it's too easy to lower ourselves into that kind of talk. Sure, not everything is wonderful, but there is so much that is – and that's what we need to celebrate – today and every day!

Thank God for our country! Thank God for His presence with us all these years, and thank God for His promised presence with us all the days ahead! I want

to invite us now to be in prayer for the United States. Will you take the green insert out of your bulletin and join me in this litany of prayer and thanksgiving?