

Our Patriotic Duty  
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7  
Matthew 7:21-29  
July 8, 2018  
First United Methodist Church, Baraboo  
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This past week there were many displays of patriotism. There were parades, speeches, picnics, fireworks displays and band concerts. Veterans were rightfully honored and given due respect. And of course displays of the American flag. At the beginning of the fireworks at the fair grounds on Wednesday night in Baraboo, the crowd engaged in a familiar ritual at the start of sporting events and many public ceremonies. A voice is heard “please rise for the singing of the national anthem” and the strains of the familiar song were heard: “O say can you see, by the dawn’s early light....” Having just celebrated Independence Day, it’s a good time to think about patriotism. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines patriotism as love for or devotion to one’s country. “What does true patriotism look like at this moment in our nation’s history?” The To answer the question let’s go to Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7.

Here’s what was happening in the year 587 BCE. The first wave of refugees/exiles from Jerusalem have now arrived in Babylon. This exile was God’s doing: punishment for failing to live according to God’s ways. These refugees from Judah are now forced to flee their homes and move to a place they’ve never been. They find themselves in a vast metropolis, Babylon, the evil empire, with its huge statue of Marduk, the city’s God. Picture these refugees from a tiny nation now being forced to march past the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the world. They walk past the numerous temples to the various gods/goddesses who were worshipped as part of the Babylonian religion. The religion of the Jews was strange to their captors. They worshipped just one God: Yahweh the LORD. A false prophet named Hananiah told these exiles that it would only be two years and then you’ll be able to return home. Don’t worry, Hananiah said. This is all just temporary. But God’s prophet, Jeremiah, in writing to the exiles in chapter 29 he writes a letter to the exiles and says “put aside this false optimism.”

You’re going to be here awhile. Set down roots. Build houses. Start families. Don’t be just on-lookers or tourists. Be patriotic! Love your new country. Listen again to Jeremiah 29, verse 7: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” The word translated as “welfare” is Hebrew “shalom.” Seek the shalom, the peace, of the city.

“Pray to the LORD on behalf of the city” Jeremiah says. To pray for the Babylonians is to pray for their enemies. Many years later Jesus will pick up this theme: “love

your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:44-45) To pray for the people of Babylon means also that Yahweh is the God not just of the Israelites, but Yahweh is the God of the Babylonians too. Yes, even in this place you did not choose to be, I am here God says. You can flourish here too, along with the people of this city: if you do not forget me.

At this time in history, God’s people were immigrants. Being foreigners in a strange land is nothing new in the Biblical narrative. Global migration – people on the move – was common in the ancient world, as it is common today. Leviticus 19:34 reads “any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord you God.” Jeremiah says to the immigrants from Judah – be patriotic – work for the good of your new country. As we move to applying God’s word to our lives today, think about what this story from Jeremiah about the immigrants from Judah making their home in Babylon might have to say to us, as we struggle with issue of immigration today. Hasn’t Jeremiah’s command – to see the welfare of the city – been lived out in the United States of America ever since its founding? Aren’t we a nation of immigrants? Each of us in this room, unless you are 100% Native American, has a family story about how our ancestors left their home and came to the shores of the United States to make a new start.

In recent weeks we’ve been horrified to see images of children being separated from their parents traveled hundreds, even more than a thousand miles to get a chance to start over as families. There’s talk of zero tolerance, in an attempt to keep out criminals. But how do we keep criminals out? Historically America has become home to many convicted criminals. In the 18<sup>th</sup> C. when John Wesley came to Savannah, Georgia as a missionary, it was a place filled with people who chose emigration over continued jail time. (For many their only crime was being poor, not being able to pay their debts) The anti-immigrant sentiments today directed towards Mexicans, Central and Latin American is just the latest in a pattern of anti-immigrant sentiment which is part of our history. Germans, Eastern Europeans, the Irish, Poles, Jews, the Chinese, the Japanese – were once the strangers who were feared, discriminated against in housing, employment and education. Of course there are the Americans whose ancestors came here on slave ships from Africa. Even after slavery formally ended after the Civil War, we still live with institutional racism in its many forms. That is part of our history and current reality too.

So, what does patriotism look like in this world we find ourselves in today? Patriotism, love for and devotion to our country, matters. If you want to see what patriotism looks like here in America today, go find a recent immigrant. The vast majority of recent arrivals to the U.S. hard working, diligent, conscientious and productive. Of course not every single one but this nation is built on the labor of immigrants. All you have to do is look around Wisconsin and you’ll discover the

contribution immigrants are making to our economy: they work in agriculture, health care, food service to name a few of many industries. Some years ago, I served a church in a small community in Eastern Dane County. This community had the largest Hispanic population in the county apart from Madison. that had an animal rendering plant. None of the recent high school graduates wanted to work in the smelly and frankly rather unpleasant working conditions of that plant. The owner provided housing for the Hispanic workers who provided the labor for that plant. A tree and shrub nursery in a nearby town, plus the dairy farms in that community, also relied on labor provided by first and second generation immigrant employees.

Even church work in Wisconsin is increasingly being done by immigrants. Meet one of our Wisconsin Conference pastors who is a recent immigrant: Procopio Arellano and his wife Cristina Vasquez. Procopio is past of the Casa de Oracion, part of the ministry of the Reedsburg United Methodist Church. Procopio left his career working for the rail road in Mexico to follow God's call to serve God's people in Wisconsin. Procopio and his wife Cristina Vasquez visited our church in February for UMW Sunday. Together Procopio and Cristina provide spiritual and practical support to a great number of people, leading worship and Bible studies in Reedsburg, the Dells, Lyndon Station and Baraboo, visiting families in need of support, taking people to medical appointments in Madison and more. They have been instrumental in getting young adult and middle-aged members of their congregation involved in a year-long training program in church planting called the Institute for Congregational Development. The graduates of this Spanish-language institute were celebrated at Annual Conference in June. Procopio and Cristina are true servant leaders. They model faithfulness, humility, joy and enthusiasm. They are very hard workers for the LORD, and seek the best for their community and their congregation.

Right now our prayer chain is praying for Cristina and Procopio. The two traveled to Mexico to renew her visa, and she was denied entry back into the U.S. So, today Procopio and Cristina are in Mexico, and their son is working with a lawyer to get a U.S. judge to grant the renewal of Cristina's visa, pleading that the judge consider the effects on the communities of Reedsburg, the Dells, Baraboo and Lyndon Station where members of Casa de Oracion reside, if their pastor were not able to return to the U.S. necessitating Procopio staying behind in Mexico. If that happens these communities and the pastoral work they are doing would be significantly disrupted. The issues immigrants are facing in this country right now are our issues too. Regarding the issues of immigration and global migration, there is no "us" and "them." We are all in this together: as people of faith and as citizens. Please join me in continuing to pray for Cristina and Procopio.

So, here's the good news at the end of this Independence Day weekend. As people of faith, we trust that when we have to leave our homes and make a new life in a strange place, God will be there. Whether we are recent immigrants or long time American citizens, we who follow Jesus Christ are called by to seek the welfare of

the place where we live. We are called to love and be devoted to our country. Here are three ways to live out this message:

1) people who love their country vote. We go to the polls whenever there is an election: mid-year, primaries, presidential years. We encourage youth to register to vote.

2) People who love their country practice civic engagement. We are informed about local political issues. We may write a letter to the editor. We contact our elected officials on an issue of concern. We talk with our friends about issues that matter to you, and learning from those with whom you disagree.

3) People who love their country and who follow Jesus Christ support their church's civic engagement. I hope you'll take time to read the insert about the resolution passed by the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in June, about the government's zero tolerance policy, and children being separated from their families at the border.

If you want to see what patriotism looks like, find a recent immigrant. I am so grateful for the work of recent immigrants: bringing milk to my table, caring for the elderly in nursing homes where I visit, serving me at restaurants I frequent and working in factories that support our rural economy.

I am grateful to be an American. I love my country. I pray that my actions not just my words will be proof of that love I feel. May it be so for all of us.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.