Independence Day 2025

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St. Dunstan's

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Falling Short in God's Eyes

"The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords ... who executes justice for the orphan and widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

"Jesus said, 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

These verses from Deuteronomy and Matthew's gospel are the scripture lessons assigned for the Fourth of July.

On that day, or weekend, of pageantry and parades, of fireworks and stirring patriotic songs, the Church wants us to stop and hear these words that remind us that God does not care about pageantry and parades or power and patriotism.

God judges a nation not by those things, not by our military might, not by how wealthy the wealthiest among us are, not by our technology, or how powerful we are in the world. Those are not what God cares about.

What God does care about when judging a nation is this: How are the poorest in the nation treated and cared for? How do we treat and care for immigrants? How do we work for peace, respecting even our enemies?

So how do you think we're doing in God's eyes?

Let's look at the actions of our government this week and reflect on how we measure up to God's standards.

First there is the budget bill. Budgets are moral documents. They tell us where our values and concerns are. They say something about our character and ethics.

By those standards the budget passed this week by Congress is a damning one.

It cuts health care for up to 16 million people. It will force the closing of an estimated 300 rural hospitals. It contains the biggest reduction of nutrition benefits in history, meaning millions of hungry kids will be even hungrier.

This is how we care for the poorest of the poor in this nation.

Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut called it "the most deeply immoral piece of legislation I have ever voted on in my entire time in Congress."

"This place feels to me, today, like a crime scene," Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse said on the Senate floor. "Get some of that yellow tape and put it around this chamber. This piece of legislation is corrupt.

"When I first got here, this chamber filled me with awe and wonderment. Today I feel disgust."

A God who cares about how the poorest of the poor are treated in the richest country in the world is surely disgusted, too.

And how about immigrants, who scripture says we are required to love, and to provide with food and clothing?

The budget says something about that, too.

The new budget pours $170 billion into immigration enforcement. That's $51 billion to build a wall on our southern border. Another $30 billion goes to ICE, tripling its budget. Another $45 billion goes to building detention facilities, a 265% increase.

The new law gives ICE more funding than all other federal law enforcement agencies combined, giving even more power to an agency whose officers often wear masks, show no identification or arrest warrants, often grabbing people off the street without knowing or caring about their immigration status. They have become, in effect, this country's secret police, with no limits on their actions or authority, using tactics favored by the Gestapo or KGB.

The reality of those budget numbers also was on display this week with a presidential visit to what he proudly proclaims as Alligator Alcatraz, a detention center being built in the Everglades.

Forget the environmental impact, which is significant. Instead let's look at what kind of place we are putting human beings.

They will be in tents and cages with no air conditioning in a swamp filled with alligators and pythons. They will be covered in mosquitos and unprotected from storms, including hurricanes. Reports from other camps show that the food is almost inedible, and medical care is nonexistent.

Let's call it what it is. This is not a detention center. It is a concentration camp.

And our president is gleeful about it, bragging that money will be saved on security because alligators don't need to be paid.

A picture from the White House shows the president surrounded by alligators wearing ICE hats with the caption: Alligator Alcatraz, Making America Safe Again.

Trump advisor and confidante Laura Loomer posted: "Alligator lives matter. The good news is alligators are guaranteed 65 million meals if we get started now."

Sixty-five million is the number of Hispanics in the country.

This administration rejoices at treating immigrants with a dehumanizing cruelty.

What makes this all even more troubling to me is that so much of it is being done and celebrated by those who claim to be Christian. These actions are antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. There is no Christian defense for supporting them.

So how are we to live? Both as Americans who love this country and grieve to see it fall so far from the ideals on which we were founded, and as Christians who grieve to see the teachings of Christ abused in blasphemous ways.

Is it possible to be both Christian and patriotic?

I believe the answer to that is yes. But what I think of as true patriotism is not blind, unquestioning obedience to the people in power. It's not, as the old bumper sticker said, "America, love it or leave it."

It is precisely because we love America that many of us take to the streets to protest the evil done by our government in our name. It is because we love America that we work to change it.

But the first demand on us is our faith, and the demands to which it calls us.

Our presiding bishop Sean Rowe, the symbolic head of our denomination, wrote this week that this is a complicated Independence Day for the Episcopal Church. He notes that 34 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were members of what would become the Episcopal Church, and that 11of our nations presidents have belonged to our church.

"Today, however," he writes, "we are known less for the powerful people in our pews than for our resistance to the rising tide of authoritarianism and Christian nationalism emanating from Washington DC.

"When religious institutions like ours enjoy easy coexistence with earthly power, our traditions become useless for interpreting what is happening around us. But our recent reckoning with the federal government has allowed us to see clearly the ease with which patriotism can lead Christians to regard our faith more as a tool of dominion than a promise of liberation."

In past months the Episcopal Church has been in the news several times for standing up for the gospel in the face of authoritarianism.

First, Mariann Budde, the bishop of Washington DC made news by having the gall to preach a sermon asking the president, who was in the congregation, to have mercy on the poor and immigrants.

In February, we were part of an interfaith group that sued the federal government to prevent ICE officers from conducting raids on houses of worship.

In May, we ended a four-decades long partnership with the federal government after it demanded that we assist in resettling white Afrikaners from South Africa, who met none of the qualifications for refugees, at a time when no true refugees are allowed to enter the country.

"These challenges to our ability to practice our faith have strained the comfortable intermingling of church and state that our institution has enjoyed for nearly 250 years," Rowe says, adding that our reckoning with our relationship to power is long overdue.

"Churches like ours may be the last institutions capable of resisting this administration's overreach and recklessness," he writes. "To do so faithfully, we must see beyond the limitations of our tradition and respond not in partisan terms, but as Christians who seek to practice our faith fully in a free and fair democracy.

"We did not seek this predicament, but God calls us to place the most vulnerable and marginalized at the center of our common life, and we must follow that command regardless of the dictates of any political party or earthly power.

"We are now being faced with a series of choices between the demands of the federal government and the teachings of Jesus, and that is no choice at all.

"This is not the same kind of patriotism that has guided our church since its founding," Rowe writes, "but this July 4th, it may be the most faithful service we can render -- both to the country we love and the God we serve."

Amen.