God and Country, Part 2
(Galatians 5:1, 13-25)

The title I've chosen for today's talk is “God and Country, Part 2”. (Part 2 because, I checked, and I preached a sermon nine years ago called God and Country. So in the unlikely event you're collecting them all in some vast, dusty three ring binder, hopefully this will save you some confusion.)

Anyway, Independence Day is coming up this Thursday. So I thought I might offer a few thoughts with you which I hope you'll find relevant and maybe even helpful in some way as we anticipate the celebration of America's 243rd birthday. So, I'd like to begin by sharing a little memory with you. Many of you know that my childhood was spent in Iowa, where at this time of year the days start to get a bit sultry. In the warm early summer evenings crickets chirp, the smell of freshly cut grass rises from the moist soil, moths circle under street lamps, and amber heat lightning often flashes in the distance.

July 4 was a very special time for us as kids. We looked forward to the Big Day. One July, after a great evening of hot dogs, sparklers and fireworks, my brother and I bravely decided to sleep in the family tent in the back yard. It was a very warm night, and I don't recall now just how much we actually slept.

But just after dawn I remember the thick smell of the canvas tent and the sound of robins and mourning doves greeting the new day. And then came a sound that I found (and I still find) magical. It was the sound of church bells from all over town, welcoming the first light of Independence Day. To this day, rarely does July 4th come around when I don't drift back over the years to that morning in my home town. It’s a reminder of a simpler time, but more importantly it’s a reminder that the inspiration for our freedom comes from God Himself. God is all about freedom.

Well, we’ve gone through a whole lot of living since 1965. There was the social strife of the 60s and 70s. There's also been a great deal more transparency about some of the less than righteous behavior historically done in the name of our country and even in the name of our God. There’s been terrorism. There’s been war after war. And now we’re living in a age of information overload, hit-and-run social media communication and (perhaps predictably) sharply increasing division.

We're an angry nation. We're often quicker to blame others than to listen. Our beautiful democracy is creaking under the strain. I remain convinced that the kind of government established by our forefathers and mothers upholds the dignity of humans created in the image of God better than any other.

But right now it appears to me that we’re in real need of divine help. When I was nine years old I had little trouble harmonizing the sound of church bells with our celebration of freedom. But now it seems that there are less bells ringing, and more confusion about what they represent.
Our times present us with many questions, and one of them is this: What happens when people invoke God and country, and do so from increasingly bitter extremes? What happens when many of us (across the spectrum) assume that God is on our side without checking out what the Lord actually says regarding the things we argue about? Should the phrase “God and country” even be so lightly used? Should God and country occupy equal footing in our hearts? And for us as believers, perhaps most importantly, how can we best truly be godly citizens?

I won’t pretend there are easy answers to these questions but I do believe that the answers will not be found in politics. Rather, they’ll be found in Christian principles truly exercised under the responsible guidance of the scriptures and of the Holy Spirit. And if we’re faithful in doing this, our politics and our governance will, however messily, begin to follow suit.

As providence would have it, we have a reading this morning that can give us at least some direction in all this. Some of the basic principles and attitudes we’re meant to nurture can be found in our epistle reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. You can find it on p. 146 in the New Testament section of your pew Bibles.

Paul opens our passage with the refreshing pronouncement that “For freedom, Christ has set us free.” Right at the outset we have a basic principle that reinforces this week’s big celebration. Freedom is a godly thing! And through his Cross and Resurrection, Jesus has freed us from the most insidious and powerful force this fallen world can produce. Because he’s set us free from slavery to evil and its outcome of spiritual death.

So how are we to respond to this gift? Well, Paul says, “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Here, of course, Paul’s referring to the yoke of the old law, along with the illusion that the law alone can save us. We’re freed by the Father’s grace through Jesus, and given the Holy Spirit to guide us in the enjoyment of our freedom.

It needs to be said that a lot rides on how we deal with freedom. Ultimately our attitudes and our behavior are paramount in advancing God’s presently unseen kingdom on this earth. And when these are in tune with God’s ways, they’re the pleasing aroma that draws people to the garden of Christ’s love. That is what can change the world.

And that’s what the remainder of our passage focuses on. After chastising those who promote enslavement to the law, and then emphasizing the centrality of faith alone working through love, today’s passage resumes at verse 13 with Paul describing what it means to live by the Spirit instead of living by what he calls “the flesh”.

By “the flesh” Paul simply means acting in accord with the limited (and even warped) priorities of fallen human nature. Living selfishly, with no regard for others or for God. Insisting on the primacy of our own will, and in so doing, estranging ourselves more and more from the source of all life and love.
In verse 13 Paul says, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only don’t use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus says the same thing. (I don’t know about you, but there are days when I watch the news and think, “What about the word ‘love’ is so hard to understand??”)

Here’s the thing: There are no out clauses here. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Period. You shall love Republicans. You shall love Democrats. You shall even love Socialists! You shall love brown people, black people and white people. You shall love citizens and non-citizens. You shall love all people who don’t look, sound, or believe like you, because all people are made in the image of God. This in fact is a founding principle of our nation. “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Love is at the center.

So Paul makes this point by contrasting life in the fallen flesh with life in the Spirit. In v. 17 he writes, “What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing whatever you want. But if you’re led by the Spirit, you’re not subject to the law.” What does this mean? It means if you’re truly led by the Spirit, the law is written on your heart (just like the prophets predicted). Plus, the Spirit gives you the power to do what’s right. God’s power, because in our own power we fall short.

So what is right? And what is wrong? Well, Paul spells it out for us, beginning with the latter. Here’s what life in the flesh looks like (v. 19): “[The works of the flesh are] fornication (which I think is better translated more generally as ‘sexual immorality’), impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

Now, here, is Paul simply being a puritanical prude? Or is he evoking something much deeper? Well, as foreign as some of these words sound in a culture that’s become pretty freewheeling, two things need to be remembered. First, God prescribes certain attitudes, behavior and speech for his people. And second, what God prescribes is intended for the health and the joy of his human creation.

If you look closely at Paul’s “flesh” list from God’s perspective, each one of these things harms someone. They harm either someone else, or oneself, or both. Sexual immorality is very often exploitative, in addition to simply being degrading as opposed to the respectful, mutual love sex is intended for between a wife and a husband.

And all of those conflict words Paul uses, have a toll. They result in objectification of others and their human fallout of emotional (and physical) injury. They bring alienation from God and neighbor—those whom we’re directed to love. And sorcery, addiction and idolatry may result in actual spiritual enslavement.
This is not what God intends for his beloved human creation! And indeed Paul points out that those who willfully persist in this way of life, or surrender themselves to the power of evil, will not inherit the kingdom of God. I mean think about this: this is from Mr. ‘Saved-by-grace-and-Living-in-Freedom!’ But those who are truly saved by grace, and living in freedom, are urged to make the choice to listen to, tap into the power of, and enjoy the presence of, the Holy Spirit: God within us.

And life in the Spirit looks very different from the ‘flesh list’. Paul says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” He’s talking about both attitude and action. These are the fruits of the kind of humble power that God modeled for us, especially in the person of his Son Jesus. These are what are supposed to typify one who follows him. And in God’s power these good things will one day banish darkness and suffering from this world.

So, will we ever perfectly display these fruits? Not in this life. No. Because Spirit and flesh will war with each other until Jesus returns and banishes completely, finally, and forever, the powers stoking the machinery of sin and darkness. If this weren’t the case, Paul would have no need to exhort and encourage us to stay in the Spirit.

But in the meantime, the Holy Spirit is not just some kind of ethereal idea or emotional state. The Spirit is the very presence and power of the creator God, whom no other person, place, or created thing is ever to supplant. And the Spirit is the One through whom you and I can and will make a positive difference in the world. //

So what does this all have to do with God and country? Well, a lot. We’ve been given the gift of freedom, and this is all about what we do with our freedom. I’m sure that it’s no news flash that the Christian faith is struggling in this country. By atrophy, shallowness or outright rejection, Christ’s church is losing ground. But we won’t gain it back by legislation, or political power, or mere pining for the past.

We gain it back by our witness and our love, here and now. In fact, our love is our witness. The day we as a people remember these things, and dwell on them, and act on them in our love of God and neighbor, will be the day we can talk about God and country with renewed meaning and conviction. Because that will be the day we return to the original intent of those who went before us two and a half centuries ago.

So, this week as we enjoy our potato salad, and the fireworks, and the baseball games, and those wonderful Sousa marches, may God inspire and empower us to ring the bells of freedom and love in our thoughts, words and deeds. For as Paul says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” That being said, have a meaningful and happy Independence Day! Amen.