Those to Whom Much Has Been Given

Luke 12:48b

I must confess that I don’t generally give much depth of thought to the 4th of July as a national observance. I’m more attentive to what goes on at the surface of things. Like most people, I associate the 4th with fun, fireworks and sparklers and the triumphant march music of John Phillip Sousa. I think of baseball, hotdogs, apple pie and Chevrolet, watermelon seed spitting contests, and stars and stripes everywhere—on bandanas and paper plates and gaudy drapes of storefront bunting—I guess the 4th is like a great big birthday party on a national scale with games and festivities, a day off of work for many, a big national pep rally. What’s not to love about that? But of course, there’s more.

Amid the festivity, I **don’t** spend very much time each July 4th, not **enough** time certainly, reflecting on the privileges and the freedoms I enjoy and too often take absolutely for granted as an American citizen. Much the way, I suppose, that I spend a lot more time on cake, candles, ice cream and presents at a birthday party than I do
contemplating the sacred, fragile, miraculous gift of life—that somehow gets lost in the shuffle.

And I spend **hardly any time at all** on July 4\(^{th}\) reflecting on my “Americanism” from a faith perspective. Fact is, I often clumsily try to avoid getting my faith and my citizenship tangled up together—it’s always been a bit like jumper cables for me—you need both faith and citizenship or faith and politics to make things go, and they’re sort of inextricably joined, bound up together for nearly their entire length—but there comes a point where the two diverge and you DON’T TOUCH THE ENDS, certainly not in the pulpit, or sparks fly everywhere.

So the preacher’s dilemma: what do you do—when the 4\(^{th}\) of July falls on a Sunday? On a Communion Sunday? It doesn’t seem right to ignore it, pretend that nothing is any different, and preach as if all that is going on out there doesn’t in any way impact in here—the danger of that, by the way, occurs in reverse—that nothing going on in here very much affects anything out there.
By the same token, you don’t want to drape the communion table in bunting, hang a flag for the pulpit cloth, and make the day a big celebration of American civil religion. We’re not here in worship today primarily as Americans, we’re here today primarily as Christians. But we ARE American Christians. So what might that mean?

As I reflected on that reality this week, a single verse of scripture kept bubbling to the front of my consciousness. I don’t generally construct a sermon on a single verse—you can get into some VERY dangerous territory that way because you can find a single verse of scripture to say most anything. But I’ll confess that up front, and then humbly put the sermon before you.

The verse that won’t let go of me this week is our scripture lesson taken from Luke’s gospel: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” It strikes me that this single verse of scripture speaks truth about so much that is good and wonderful about our country—and also serves as the corrective to so much that is wrong with it.
The first step, for me, is the humble awareness of just how much we have been given, and I’ll begin at the place of our material privilege.

That privilege is something we easily underestimate these days, for at least two reasons; first, we are absolutely immersed in a consumer culture that ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS invites us to reflect upon what we do not have, what we neeeeeeecessary; and of course what we “need” is substantially determined by what everyone around us has.

For example--some of you grew up with party line telephones where you had to wait for your neighbor to finish talking before you could make a call; I grew up with a single telephone extension in the house, hanging on the kitchen wall—it hung silently much of the time. Today, the average house has two or three or four phone extensions and the average fourth, fifth, or sixth grader has his or her own phone with constant connection and the capability of texting Topeka during the worship service—and really neeeeeeds a new one because the video capability isn’t good enough. I say that, not to pick on technology-driven teenagers, by the way…but to illustrate how “need”
constantly grows in a consumer culture. And instead of marveling at and being grateful for what we have, we get subtly sucked into thinking about how much we DON’T yet have.

A second pitfall is the current national economy. Let’s be honest—it’s horrible. Many of our neighbors are unemployed or underemployed. Many folks who do have jobs can’t recall what a raise looks like and have even experienced pay cuts. The housing market has tanked. Fixed incomes and retirements have shrunk even as the cost of living has grown. There is genuine scarcity in the headlines and in the air—a feeling of uncertainty, insufficiency, inadequacy. So we forget to think of ourselves EVEN NOW as privileged. We begin to imagine ourselves as barely making it: we who take indoor plumbing and public healthcare absolutely for granted.

The average American family has a car—maybe not a new one, a fancy one—but a car or two or more. The average family most of in the rest of the world will never own one.
A cutback, for many Americans, is to scale back to basic cable—most of the world’s people will never own a television. We see the show cribs on MTV and think of our houses as modest by comparison. I visited one room homes in Merida, Mexico with dirt floors and the only furniture was two molded plastic chairs and hammocks for sleeping. Our most modest homes are castles by comparison.

We fuss about our diets—and I read somewhere this week that we could feed the world for a year on what Americans annually spend....on ice cream.

So the economy may be bad and individually some Americans may be experiencing some very hard times relative to what we have grown accustomed to...but as a nation we remain phenomenally, uncharacteristically wealthy and privileged. And we MUST remember that, because to lose sight of our privilege, our scripture reminds us, is to lose sight of our responsibility to one another and to the world. If we begin to imagine that we do not really have much, it permits us to imagine that we are not really obligated to much. In reality, if we eat three times a day—much of the world would call that a privilege. It
invites SERIOUS contemplation—what do I do, with the material much that I have been given?

And the much that we have been given is not merely economic or material. What of the political freedom we enjoy and take for granted? The freedom to differ, to vote my conscience, the freedom to speak my mind publically and to write a letter to the newspaper complaining about some action of my governmental leaders and sign my name without fear of reprisal?

Yet we who have been given so much freedom—do we use it, these days with an appropriate awe or sense of responsibility? Do we use it to build one another up, through honest debate and helpful critique—to listen to dissenting views? Do we use it with humility, with reverence, with respect? I would submit that we have lost our way.

Failing to honor just how much we have been given, we daily accept and engage in politics at the lowest common denominator. We call ourselves the United States—yet in my lifetime we've never been
more divided. We are red states and blue states, red people and blue people. We eat up hyper-partisan punditry with a spoon. We don’t seek news coverage that broadens our understanding or exposes our blind spots but coverage that extols our viewpoints and feeds our biases.

Every significant political issue seems to present a scorched earth battle; we use our freedom of speech to proclaim the incompetence or idiocy of our opponents, we point, we blame, and we would rather litigate than listen. BOTH SIDES OF THE CONVERSATION ARE RESPONSIBLE, BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE are at our worst, stiff-necked, obstinate, disrespectful, and obstructionist.

It seems to me that the fourth of July is a time to give thanks for a freedom that demands our best political selves rather than permitting our worst political selves. And I wonder if God does not look at us and see overindulged overgrown infants? More is required of us by the much that we have been given. It is past time that we humbly acknowledge that.
I offer one more thought. The environment. The splendid, unsurpassed natural resources that we as a nation enjoy. The world is vast and filled with abundance, but much of it is unhospitable for life and unpractical for cultivation. We enjoy the best of everything—in truth, we do enjoy spacious skies and amber waves of grain.

But to take that for granted is to consume more than we conserve; it is to accept a lifestyle that is more oriented to convenience than to reverence. An illustration—Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro both have curbside recycling. For those not served at our doorstep, there are recycling centers throughout the community. Yet I go to the soccer fields, or the baseball fields, or to school sporting events and I see trash cans overflowing with recyclable plastic Gatorade bottles and recyclable aluminum cans. I lift that up as a symbol—or a symptom—of a culture of waste shortsighted consumption rather than one of grateful stewardship. There are of course, many other examples.

Now the point here—is not to induce guilt but to invite reflection. Not to point fingers at what is wrong in our nation but to pause in grateful
reflection about the privilege of what is right in our nation—and the humble response to that privilege that true faith invites. Do I, an American, accept my great privilege in virtually every aspect of my life as a great gift and a great responsibility?

With that question in mind, I am deeply grateful that our fourth of July celebration, in this place and in this hour, is a celebration of Communion. Why? I can think of no place other than the Lord’s table where we gather in such complete knowledge of God’s abundant gifts. At this table our differences and divisions, so evident elsewhere, are simply not important; At this table we are not givers, only receivers. Receiving, we reflect—we examine our lives; we confess our imperfection; we receive forgiveness; we resolve rededication; we celebrate God’s goodness; and we go forth empowered to live our faith more deeply.

It is a table of humility and thanks, a table of unity and gentleness, and a meal where each of us is permitted both to be served and to serve our neighbor. We are abundantly blessed and reminded that we are called to be a blessing. Thanks be to God. Amen.