

## “Finding Common Ground: Prayers for Our Nation”

Psalm 67; Luke 10:25-37 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be united by your Spirit of compassion with all our neighbors. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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A secular holiday like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is a tricky moment for the American church. In our discussions of the dangers of Christian nationalism and idolatry earlier this year, we clarified how careful we must be about conflating the symbols of our national identity with the symbols of our faith, which calls us beyond national identity. It's clear we must not kneel in worship before a flag. And yet, as pastor and author Bruce Epperly wrote in a recent commentary, occasions like the 4<sup>th</sup> “provide opportunities for reflection and, at times, confession of the dissonance between reality and aspiration in our national life.”<sup>1</sup>

That dissonance is loud and clear these days, with the level of vitriol in public discourse at a fever pitch and public policy-making practically at a standstill because of partisan gridlock. Whether it's reflection we need or confession, there is no doubt that, as Christians, Independence Day can be a chance to pray fervently for our nation. And when I say ‘pray’ I mean more than mindless repetitions of “God bless America.” Psalm 67 calls the nations to “be glad and sing for joy,” because God

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2021/06/the-fourth-of-july-and-the-healing-of-the-american-spirit/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=share\\_bar&fbclid=IwAR27-obbnQEdCyPt6\\_4qoyXvTfUgGMmpXcXHZmrlL1JmL0Bo-IsC0Tfyauk](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2021/06/the-fourth-of-july-and-the-healing-of-the-american-spirit/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=share_bar&fbclid=IwAR27-obbnQEdCyPt6_4qoyXvTfUgGMmpXcXHZmrlL1JmL0Bo-IsC0Tfyauk)

“judge[s] the people with equity and guide[s] the nations upon earth.” Disciples pastor Layne Beamer applied this to our place and time recently, when he wrote, “We need to lift up a petition that God might bless America, with the realization that the way that God will bless us is with corrective guidance, rather than blank-check sanctioning of our actions no matter what they might be. If God is to bless us, we must be willing to listen and to be guided and to admit that we need guidance.”<sup>2</sup>

In theory, church is a wonderful place for us to model what it means to humbly turn to God for guidance. This could be a precious gift church people could offer our country in this difficult moment in our history, if only we can keep our faith foremost in our hearts, rather than letting our partisan sentiments overtake us. The break-down in public discourse ought to be something Disciples could help heal, professing as we do unity in the midst of diversity of opinion and perspective. We are the people who proclaim the ultimate value of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Loving our neighbors – our unexpected neighbors, our neighbors whose race or religion may be different from our own, as in the story Jesus told that sassy lawyer – is one of the most important contributions we can offer our nation at this point in history. As Michael Gerson, speechwriter for George W. Bush, recently put it, “No form of loving your country involves despising half its citizens.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/layne.beamer/posts/10160795994512656>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/01/american-democracy-civic-healing-fighting-gop/>

So how can we seek common ground, as people of various perspectives and political orientations, so that we can unite in prayer for our nation? How can we take this story Jesus told as an answer to the question ‘Who is my neighbor?’ and apply it to our hopes and goals for our country? A number of years ago, I had the privilege to serve on a denominational task force that was charged with exploring how we could adapt our process for speaking as a church to issues of social injustice and morality, so that it could be less polarizing. One of the insights from that process that will always stick with me came from one of the representatives of the more ‘conservative’ congregations. He told us that often the sticking point wasn’t the problem that was being addressed. Conservative congregations recognize many of the same problems and concerns that our more liberal churches do, he said. The point where we got stuck was in prescribing solutions, because we sometimes have very different ideas about how to fix things.

Thus it was that we decided to incorporate into our new model a two-part structure that identified and defined the problem in one section and created a whole new section where different congregations could share the methods and strategies they were using to address the problem, so we could all learn from each other. Meanwhile, all of us could be united in prayer, knowing that some portion of Christ’s body was hurting, impacted by the issue of injustice the discussion was addressing. Some might stop and help the man attacked on the road. Some might ride ahead to warn the innkeeper to prepare a room. Some might build a clinic closer to the scene

of the crime. Some might go back and confront the priest and the Levite about their refusal to act, knowing that we have a responsibility to call one another to righteous action. Some might step back and examine why that particular road has so many robbers, while others might analyze the societal structures that encourage people to turn to robbery as a means to support themselves and then advocate for changes that would diminish the likelihood of such choices. All of us can pray for an end to violence and an increase in our capacity and desire to care for one another, especially in times of dire need.

The gospel gives us a standard of neighborliness to apply to our shared life as Christians and as Americans. It shows us both what it means to be a neighbor and whom we should view as a neighbor – namely, anyone and everyone we come across, and even more so if that person is in need. How can we bring that sensibility and ethic into our prayer life as we seek common ground in praying for our nation?

Holy God, can we pray to you to help us seek true equality for all people? For an end to discrimination and unfairness? Can we ask you to help relieve us of our fears of people whose experiences of life are different than our own? Can we pray for the humility to recognize our need to examine our past and our present so that we can have a clear-eyed understanding of what needs to change in order to promote the flourishing of all people?

God of Love, can we pray to you to change our violent hearts, our hearts that acquiesce to a logic of ‘might makes right’ and a dehumanizing nihilism that paralyzes

us in the face of school shootings and domestic violence? Can you help us build up our trust in the power of love to transform our society?

God, can you make us more gracious, more generous, more empathetic, so that we can put ourselves in the shoes of people who are struggling? Can you remind us how to be proud of our welcome, rather than our ramparts? Can you open our hearts and our minds to see the gifts that strangers can bring into our midst? Can you help us see neighbors rather than invaders, friends not threats?

God of blessing, send us your guidance, so that we might trust in your saving power, rather than the machinations of war and political chicanery. Help us to hear your call from the voices of those who have been silenced, those whose votes are suppressed, those who are demonized and blamed.

We want to carry those who have been hurt to places of care and healing, O God. Help us to work for access to health care and healthy communities for all people, that no one might die from lack of care, lack of medication, lack of nourishing food or clean water.

Give us gentle words and creative, compassionate hearts, O God, that we might break through the angry and cynical rhetoric that keeps us divided from our neighbors. Help us create new symbols, new conversations, new approaches to old problems. Help us be good neighbors. We pray this day, all these things, for our nation, and for our world, proclaiming you as sovereign and committing ourselves to sharing your love with all. In Jesus' name, Hallelujah and Amen.