
God Bless America

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler

Atlanta, Georgia

A Sermon for the Fourth of July: Independence Day

The phrase is "God bless you." God bless you - maybe one of the most under-used phrases in the Christian vocabulary. Oh, we do say it nonchalantly. Most often these days, we say it when somebody sneezes. God bless you!

And, particularly in the American South, we say it in one of the most peculiar ways possible. When we know someone is not quite right, or not quite in our party, and we can't bring ourselves to admit that he is not quite right, we say, "And good old Sam, bless his heart." Or when we don't quite agree with him, "Well, bless his heart."

Today, though, we use the phrase boldly and earnestly. God bless you! I have just said it for three hours straight, to all those running down Peachtree Street during the Atlanta Fourth of July Road Race. Blessings to you! God bless America.

I believe that today, the Fourth of July, Independence Day, is a day when we pray openly for God to bless America.

We've come a long way in this country. Have you noticed in the last year the tremendous number of books published about the founding heroes of our country? There is a new book about John Adams, another one about Alexander Hamilton. Time magazine last week featured the curious philosopher statesman, Thomas Jefferson.

These men, and women, too, are worth remembering. They are worth studying. They are worth studying in the same way that Christians ought to study, and give thanks, for our own church history.

Remembering the past reveals great heroism; but it also reveals that the past has never been as easy and wonderful as we think. The church has always had conflicts and disagreements. Our own country, and every country, has had disagreements. We have differences.

But we've come a long way. For instance, we've come a long way in the manner in which we settle political disputes. Like others, I shudder to read some of things politicians say in an election year. Or, if the politicians don't say them, the handlers and the consultants sure say them.

It is no secret that our country today is evenly divided on a few volatile political issues. As usual, however, we don't hear much about what we agree on, even though we agree on a massive amount. Instead, election year politics will try to absolutize our divisions. What I mean by that is that we will be told that if our friend disagrees on one point, while agreeing on all the rest, then our friend is a political enemy. That is a shame. Bless your heart!

Today, in America, let us not absolutize our divisions. We have two great political parties, and we have several creative new ones. Bless them! Appreciate one another!

We've come a long way since that strange day in 1804 when a political dispute was settled in Weehawken, New Jersey. How was it settled then? By a duel! The conflict between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton became so great that they had to

challenge each other with pistols in a duel: July 11, 1804. Their antagonism had been growing for years. Finally, Aaron Burr, the grandson of the great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Bless his heart.

The great Thomas Jefferson was in the middle of it. He and Aaron Burr had actually tied one another in the presidential vote of 1800. They tied! Almost like our election of the year 2000. I shall never forget actually telling my children in November of 2000 to watch television. The confusion was amazing. George W. Bush and Al Gore were so close in the final balloting that no one knew for sure, at first, who had been elected.

Some say that our country is still very evenly divided. Bless our hearts!

But I don't think we are divided as people say. Today, I say let us celebrate independence in a special way. Let's celebrate independence from the issues that divide us. Let's celebrate independence, freedom, from our political anger and rancor. Wouldn't that be a celebration?

The Christian Church has much to teach our country on what independence really means. By no means is the Christian Church an unflawed example, to be sure. We are as riddled as any institution with in-fighting and resentment, bless our hearts, but we do know one thing. We know how to bless.

The Church is in the business of blessing. The word "bless" means "to speak good words to." When you bless someone, you speak good words to them. I believe it is the Church's role today to speak good words, to speak good words to one another, and to our entire country. It is the church's role to bless America.

The way we do that, however, is by blessing one another. After all, God works, ultimately, through each other, through you and through me. The way that God blesses people is by using us, by using us to bless each other. When we bless someone in the name of God, God blesses someone.

Find someone to bless today. In fact, find someone who is different from you and bless that person. It might be the person who is closest to you who is also the most different. If that is the case in your family, then you are just like our country right now.

We do not settle those differences by dueling. I don't think we even settle those differences by voting. No, we settle those differences by blessing.

We settle differences by blessing. America settles differences by blessing one another. God settles differences by blessing us.

And when God blesses us, we are transformed. We are transformed. That's not to say we give up our opinions. No, our transformation is that we become a thankful people. We become a people willing to give thanks for one another.

Our country needs thanksgiving more than anything right now. We need blessing. We know how to resent one another. We know how to be threatened by one another. We know how to be afraid of one another.

God wants to teach us how to give thanks for one another. God wants to bless us. God wants to bless all of us, no matter who we are. God wants to bless America.

AMEN.

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