

Is it Independence, Interdependence, or Dependence?

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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To state the obvious, today is July 4th. In our nation we call this Independence Day commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence 234 years ago in Philadelphia even though not all signatures were affixed to that document on the same day. Nevertheless, this has become a very important day in the life of our country. If you are 40 years old or more do you remember all the emphasis on the Bicentennial in 1976? Colorado even issued special license plates that year which I have kept as a token of the focus in our country 34 years ago. Our family took a driving vacation to the Canadian Rockies that summer, planning our travels so that we would be back in the US on the day of July 4th to be part of the observance of that special day. On the 4th we arrived in Glacier National Park to participate in whatever would happen in that place to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. When we learned that no special events were planned, we were quite disappointed. We wanted to celebrate.

When we lived in Aurora earlier in our lives, I joined a Kiwanis Club, a club I was a member of for 20 years before we moved to Richmond, Virginia. Every time we gathered, we sang the Kiwanis song to begin our meeting – the same routine used by all Kiwanians. Dr. Robert O'Dell would strum on his guitar to get us started, and then we'd join in with, "When Kiwanis calls, when Kiwanis calls, let every man stand up." Back then it was only men, a restriction changed decades ago. The song ended with, "We pledge to thee our loyalty, when Kiwanis calls."

So the first thing on the agenda was to pledge our loyalty to Kiwanis. Then we'd say the Pledge of Allegiance, which as you all know, begins, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America..." First, we declared our loyalty to Kiwanis, then our allegiance to our country, and then we'd pray, intimating yet a third object of loyalty, allegiance, and devotion, this time to God.

Is it possible to hold three different loyalties? Is not that an inherently contradictory position? What happens when the various loyalties espouse conflicting values? What gives?

Of course, the easiest way to handle this is to ignore the conflicting values and priorities inherent in juggling competing loyalties. The result of such an approach does lead to inconsistencies that cannot be harmonized.

We all struggle with these tensions, wanting to be supportive of community efforts for good, supporting national needs, and recognizing God's claims on us. How we define God in this discussion also has a great bearing on our understanding of these competing

loyalties. As Christians, you and I are clear about the definition of God just in the labeling of who we are, Christians. That word says our devotion is to Christ, not some amorphous and ethereal concept of “God,” Supreme Being, Omnipotent Deity, Master of the Universe or any such verbiage. Hence, the cross is always central to our lives and loyalty, our worship and witness, our definition and discipleship. Even with that clarification, we still struggle with the various calls for loyalty be they Kiwanis, country, Christ, or any other. Not easy to be completely consistent.

In the Church, our message is always about Christ Jesus, no matter where we live on this earth. We can be grateful for associations we have in life, the place in which we live, but our worship is singularly focused on Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Since we are the Church gathered this morning, we lift our eyes, hearts, and minds to the One sent to be the Savior. He is the One who deserves our undivided loyalty, allegiance, and devotion.

We are always tempted to embrace an ever changing and fluid set of priorities – family first, country first, job first, fun first, me first. We are in the time of the Church Year during which our concentration is to be on our response to the gift of the Savior. From December through May (Advent through Pentecost) we walked through the life and ministry of Christ Jesus – reviewing the story of salvation. From June through November (the Sundays after Pentecost) we ask, “What do we now do?”

In today’s Gospel are words that point to the answer to the question, “What do we do?” Our role is to be laborers in the harvest, workers and servants of Christ giving the love and compassion that he gave to us. The text also tells us that we are not to depend on our own resources: “no purse, no bag, no sandals” (Luke 10:4), only our loyalty to Christ Jesus. Yes, it will be dangerous, for not everyone will be eager to listen. It is like being “lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3) and rejection is to be expected.

Paul cautions us, “Take care that you yourselves are not tempted” (Gal. 6:1). I recall learning in Sunday School about the wisdom of Solomon, the third and final King of Israel, the unified nation of Israel. He was so wise that he knew how to determine which woman was the real mother of a baby being claimed by two women. Solomon prayed for “an understanding mind to govern (Israel), able to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9). The Lord God of Israel granted him that wisdom.

I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor...

1 Kings 3:12-13

Yet Solomon in later years lost his focus and became enamored with wealth, wives, and weapons, and 1 Kings describes Solomon not as a wise leader of the Chosen People but with these words: “his heart was not true to the Lord his God...Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord” (1 Kings 11:4, 6) resulting in a broken relationship with the Lord God of Israel as stated in 1 Kings 11:9 and 11, “Then the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from

the Lord, the God of Israel...he did not observe what the Lord commanded.” The temptation for worldly status and acquisitions was too much for Solomon. Paul’s word of caution applies to us today: take care that you yourselves are not tempted.

Competing attractions and loyalties are the conditions of life that surround us always, not to the same degree as they did to Solomon, but nevertheless real for us. We do not live in a state of pure devotion to Christ Jesus, so we seek strength from him to keep our lives centered on him and him alone. Every day including July 4th is our Dependence Day, for we are dependent on God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All other competing loyalties are lesser priorities. Christ calls and claims us; he leads and loves us, sends and supports us, helps and heals us. As we all said at the conclusion of the reading of the Gospel, “Praise to you, O Christ.” Amen.