

07.07.24 ~ Pentecost 7 & 4th of July Recognition

“Communing with the Spirit”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Ezekiel 36:25-28 (NIV)

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. ²⁸ Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Leader: These Are God’s Words of Assurance.

All: Thanks be to God!

John 16:12-16 (The Voice)

¹² I have so much more to say, but you cannot absorb it right now. ¹³⁻¹⁵ The Spirit of truth will come and guide you in all truth. He will not speak His own words to you; He will speak what He hears, revealing to you the things to come and bringing glory to Me. The Spirit has unlimited access to Me, to all that I possess and know, just as everything the Father has is Mine. That is the reason I am confident He will care for My own and reveal the path to you. ¹⁶ For a little while you will not see Me; but after that, a time will come when you will see Me again.

Leader: These Are Christ’s Instructive Words!

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Reassuring God, we thank you for another week of rest, work, play, healing, memories, joy, celebration, fellowship, study, worship, shelter, and sustenance. We also thank you for the legacy and integrity of our country’s past, present, and future, as we continue to recognize our independence from tyranny. Help us to see the beauty in living out our freedom despite disagreements. Help us to see the beauty in demanding religious liberty; and finally let us see the beauty of living in the Spirit of repentance and redemption. May we remember our commission to spread the Gospel to those who do not know your Son, Jesus. Open these Scriptures to enlighten us and motivate us to pursue the Holy Spirit’s guidance rather than our own. May my reflections be your voice heard today. Amen.

Happy Independence Week! Yes, we already wished each other a Happy Fourth of July, probably. It is never too late to celebrate a special occasion like a person’s birthday or a country’s 248th birthday. I hope you had a nice day with friends, strangers (if you went to a parade!), family, or watched the Capitol 4th on TV. We recognize the victory of the

Revolutionary War seeking Independence from Great Britain, its government economics, high taxes, and religious mandates. Although the Continental Congress voted on July 2nd in favor of Richard Henry Lee's resolution for independence, the thirteen colonies formally adopted Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence on July 4th. Technically speaking, today ends what we call "Fourth of July Weekend," so we continue our celebration today. Yet we must be wary of justifying our beliefs under what is named "Christian Nationalism," because that is a divisive and dangerous trend among churches. We are independent thinkers and must remain so; no institution has the right to control our spiritual pursuit or demand our allegiance. Even Jesus gives us a choice to become a believer or not.

You may notice that although we sing patriotic songs, and we honor our veterans who serve in the military, we are free to worship independently. You may also see that although there are red, white, and blue symbols around our sanctuary and that I wear a flag lapel pin, we do not have flag poles or standing official flags in our worship space. As we became a more diverse and interfaith nation and community, that decision to remove flags was made many years ago to honor our understanding that there is and should be a separation between church and state; and as our website states under the Missions/Baptist Traditions tab, that:

Christians are free OF religion, FOR religion, and free FROM religion. The state is not Christ and Christ is not the state. This protects the integrity of Christians to speak to public issues without trying to use the coercive powers of the state to advocate their positions. Religious freedom advocates that the best society is where persons of Faith and of no Faith are free to advocate and debate beliefs.

We are grateful to live in a country with freedom to worship and to vote as we choose. Also, as Baptists, we maintain church autonomy, equality, and live out our Christianity with the distinctives called “priesthood of all believers” and “soul freedom”. “Historically, Christians of the Baptist traditions began as "separatists" which our fellow Anglicans labeled us, during the late 1500's in England. Since that beginning, **FREEDOM** has been a key passion. This freedom allows us to worship independently and occasionally agree to disagree on issues, UBC [Website](#).)”

Our first passage in Ezekiel reassures and reminds the exiles and us that we are first God’s own people, and he is our only God. Even flags and Bibles can become idols or symbols of oppression. During the time of Ezekiel’s prophecy and calling, the Israelites had been in Babylon a long time and had assimilated as God directed. They intermarried and worshipped idols to get along with the culture; however, God called Ezekiel to wake up the people and return back to him as their captivity was coming to an end. Ezekiel reminded them that God had the power to cleanse their hearts and put new life into them if they followed his statutes. Even if they struggled to do so, our passage assured them that God himself would perform through his spirit whatever it took to purge their sin and they would have works of grace and mercy to perform once they returned home to Israel. How appropriate to study this confusion of loyalties on Independence weekend. Americans were split in 1776 too because of the financial and political gain for some loyalists that England promised as compared to the new land’s risks, death, new responsibilities, and severing all ties with family back in Great Britain.

With true repentance, the Israelites would experience God as they never had before; he would motivate them and provide for them if they agreed to be his people. The Spirit would empower them to be faithful to God. It is also good timing for **us** as we take communion today; the wafer and juice remind us of God's sacrifice on the cross yet with salvation comes responsibility and surrender. Will we truly be his people in times of division? Will we be people of peace or of discord?

Although the disciples did not yet realize what was to come, they were about to witness their dear friend and teacher killed on the cross, so Jesus tries to prepare them. Our John passage today is the end of Christ's farewell message to the disciples. Like Ezekiel, Jesus refers to a Spirit which will come to empower them to endure this ordeal and to encourage others to repent of their sins. The disciples (probably like the Israelites of Ezekiel's message) are nowhere near ready to hear this news or receive the Holy Spirit for comfort. They will probably not remember this message from Jesus, but he shares it anyway:

¹³⁻¹⁵ The Spirit of truth will come and guide you in all truth. He will not speak His own words to you; He will speak what He hears, revealing to you the things to come and bringing glory to Me. The Spirit has unlimited access to Me, to all that I possess and know, just as everything the Father has is Mine. That is the reason I am confident He will care for My own and reveal the path to you.

Jesus adds that it is for their good that he is going away, for then he will send the Paraclete (v. 7), a Greek term for "advocate", "counsellor" or "helper". The Spirit is already present (as we know from Ezekiel's writings), but Jesus cannot send the Spirit in his role as Paraclete until he himself has returned to the Father. In both Ezekiel and in John, this Spirit will guide and motivate the people to do God's gracious work in the

world and will reassure them as they face persecution or division. I believe that is an important message for us as a church as we enter into the summer of Presidential Candidate debates and campaigns. Let us recall whose we are and how important our work is both in the world and to each other as the Body of Christ.

The spirit will cleanse us, create a new heart and a new life in us! That is both Ezekiel's and Jesus' promise to us! We are and will be a transformed people because of his sacrifice on the cross. Do you remember these verses from Isaiah 11?

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them . . . ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

This peaceable kingdom imagery gives me hope for this summer and fall; that **God's kingdom work** is more important than anything else we see or do. You are part of that work! Your faith is renewed every morning; your commitment is renewed through this communion observance. Remember your baptism; remember your belief system; study the Scriptures! Be prepared for Jesus to return. Let us discover beauty not division as we commune with the Spirit today and every day. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1^{NIV})."

Amen? Amen! ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for these words of encouragement and motivation. As we celebrated our country's

independence, let us celebrate too our religious liberties, and never lose sight of those privileges. We ask your Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter, to embolden us every day to do your work here in the world until your return. Please bless these elements as we recommit to you through this communion together. Thank you, Jesus, for it is in your name we pray, **Amen**.