

Sermon :: 05-Jul-2026

Independence Day,¹ All Years

“ that we may use *our liberty* in accordance with *your gracious will* ”

Do you have—and I hope I don’t *trigger* you with this question!—a recurring *anxiety dream*? The suitcase you never packed, the exam you never took, the burner you never turned off ... that haunts your sleep, from time to time, causing you to panic ... until, at last, you wake up and, heaving a sigh of relief, realize that it isn’t *actually* happening?

My anxiety dream concerns my senior thesis, in college ... and how close it came to not getting written. Now, I’m not a procrastinator by nature ... but for some reason—probably, in all candor, because I was *really enjoying* my senior year!—I just couldn’t get it started. September became October; October became Thanksgiving; Thanksgiving became Christmas ... and I still hadn’t done a *thing—nothing*. I was *actively avoiding* my poor thesis advisor, for fear of having to explain why I’d been ‘AWOL’ all semester!

And then, the day after Christmas, I suddenly turned on a dime ... did a complete ‘one-eighty.’ I had my father drive me back to school—which was utterly deserted, for break. For the next two-and-a-half *months*, I did almost *nothing but* translation and research.² And then, during one hellacious week in March (that was *supposed* to be spring *break*), I outlined and wrote more than a hundred pages, pausing only to eat and sleep (a little). By the grace of God, I got that thesis turned in ... and, somehow, I even won a prize for it. But to this day, *my* recurring anxiety dream is attending my college graduation and being told there’s no diploma for me ... because I never turned in my thesis!

**

Monomania ... all-or-nothing thinking ... a laser-focus on just *one* single *thing*: It’s the stuff of college theses ... and also of our life together as a nation, right now.

Two Sundays ago, we explored how *one* ‘stream’ of American culture, rooted in the Declaration of Independence’s spirit of *separation*, privileges the *individual* ... the *rebel* ... the *go-it-alone-r* ... who prizes the right to part ways with the collective and pursue their own path, regardless of what society says or thinks: We called this the TRUTH *WITHIN US*, for although we can *abuse* it, it can *also* be an expression of the God-given goodness—the *dignity* and *worth*—that resides within each one of us.

And then *last* week, we explored how *another* ‘stream’ of American culture, *this* one rooted in the U.S. Constitution’s spirit of *coming together*, privileges the *collective* ... the *cooperative*: an *interwoven network* of relationships, interests and obligations ... that prizes our efforts to care for, protect and nurture one another: We called this the TRUTH *FROM ABOVE*, for it’s an expression of Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Our current politics, in this country, seem to be very starkly divided along these TRUTH *WITHIN US* *versus* TRUTH *FROM ABOVE* lines. *One* party ... or, at least, *one* constellation of voters ... prioritizes maximizing the rights, the opportunities and the self-reliance of the *individual*. Government should restrict us as *little* as possible ... create as much capitalist ‘*runway*’ as possible ... and let people rise

¹ The festal propers are being used with the bishop’s permission.

² I was writing about a book of letters the Roman governor Pliny the Younger wrote to the Emperor Trajan.

or fall—flourish or fail—on their own, as *greatly* as possible. The *other* party ... or *another* constellation of voters ... promotes the guiding hand, the mutuality and the WE'RE-ALL-IN-THIS-TOGETHER-ness of the *collective*. Government exists to make society more *humane* ... to *rein in* the consequences of unbridled individual effort and ambition ... and to create a rising tide that lifts *all* boats.

As we've *also* seen these last two weeks, however, *Jesus* isn't *EITHER-OR*: neither all about the *individual* and nothing about the *collective*, or vice-versa. Rather, as both *individual and God* ... as Savior of *both* each *one* of us *and* of *all humanity* as a *whole* ... He is *BOTH-AND*: Jesus commends workable *balance*, rather than positional *purity* ... a situational '*flex*' *between* two poles, rather than a slavish 'tethering' to only *one* ... *both* submitting to those in authority and loving our neighbors as ourselves—the TRUTH *FROM ABOVE*—as St Paul encourages the Romans; *and* using our faith and our conscience—the TRUTH *WITHIN US*—to assess a civil obligation, like the payment of taxes, to ensure that it complies with the precepts of God, as we witness Jesus doing today. Stated secularly, it's Jesus' aim to 'wed' the *Declaration's* spirit of individual *independence* with the *Constitution's* spirit of collective *co-operation*.

**

And so, this weekend, as we celebrate our nation's two-hundred fiftieth birthday ... as we remember not *only* the sharp *rebellion* that *separated* us into a *sovereign* nation, but *also* the willing *union* that *cohered* us into a *workable* one ... as we ponder our prospects as a once-and-(*hopefully*)-future united people: I think it's incumbent upon us to seek out approaches to some of the most pressing issues confronting us as a nation—not to mention a world—with Jesus' *BOTH-AND* perspective: giving meaningful weight to *both* the *individual's* pursuit of her or his *separate* goals and beliefs ... *and* *society's* pursuit of the greatest *common* good for the greatest *number*.

- What if, for example, we came to regard the earth's environment and natural resources as *both* a *gift* for us to leverage and exploit for our own immediate ends ... *and* an *endowment*—a *legacy*—for us to steward and preserve for the survival of our posterity ... instead of all-one-or-the-other?
- What if we tried solving the healthcare crisis in this country by *marrying* incentives for innovation and monetary reward for *individual* players *with* the need for greater access and affordability for *all* ... rather than constantly playing them off *against* one another?
- What if we recognized that international aid—our supplying food, medicine and know-how to other countries that desperately need them—was *both* an opportunity for doing *objective good* in this world *and* 'transactional diplomacy' that *profits* American *business* and *bolsters* America's *standing* in this world?
- What if it became our national defense policy to maintain a strong, modern military that *both* keeps us *free* and *independent* as a sovereign *nation* ... *and* that we deploy across the globe in ways that foster international peace and cultivate the interdependence of *all* peoples?
- What if we both embraced the power and innovation of artificial intelligence—all the *good* it may do for *each* of us, *individually* ... but, *at the same time*, were clear-eyed about its financial, environmental and human costs—all the *bad* it may foist upon *all* of us,

collectively?

- What if our going-in position on taxation were that individuals *should* enjoy the fruits of their own labors—*reap* what they sow ... but also that since individuals lack both the capability *and* the capacity to do things like building roads and granting patents, educating children and prosecuting crime ... society requires adequate *revenue* to *pay* for them?
- What if our approach to civil rights—race, sex, religion; ethnicity, ability, sexuality—were tailored to honor the dignity and worth of *each individual* (in a careful calibration of rights) ... while also acknowledging that addressing past wrongs done to *whole classes* of people, even if *blindly* ... sometimes requires providing remedies to *whole classes* of people, *willingly*?
- What if we set about building an immigration scheme that balanced the right of *societies* to order themselves and the right of *individuals* to move freely?; that balanced the *stability* of a *single* people celebrating its *own* culture and the *growth* that ensues when *many* peoples mix *peaceably*?
- And finally, what if we approached our *politics* ... the ‘playing field’ on which *all* these issues are debated ... as *not only* a means of expressing, robustly, the values that drive ‘*me*’ as an *individual* ... but also, *equally* robustly, a pathway for responding to the multiple needs and diffuse desires of the *all*, who, *with* me, make up the *whole* of the United States?

**

Jesus’ ministry would not have succeeded³ ... *we* wouldn’t be sitting here *today* ... if He had *only* fed the hungry or *only* forgiven the sinner—the TRUTH FROM ABOVE ... without *also* taking to task the powerful and turning over the tables of the pitiless—the TRUTH WITHIN HIM. Likewise, we’d never have *become* a nation if we hadn’t invoked our *individual* rights to *separate* from forces we found oppressive—the Declaration’s TRUTH WITHIN US ... and we’d never have *remained* one if we hadn’t collectively agreed to *unify* our endeavors and harness our disparate passions—the Constitution’s TRUTH FROM ABOVE.

And so, this July Fourth weekend ... this milestone birthday moment ... let us ask ourselves: Where do we go from *here*? We cannot survive if each *one* of us keeps fetishizing and demanding fealty to the most extreme TRUTH WITHIN US: Individuals need to sacrifice *something*, to live in *society*. Nor, however, can we truly flourish if we seek to quash and suppress—in some overzealous pursuit of TRUTH FROM ABOVE—everything that makes each one of us an *individual* ... for the good of the whole: The lifeblood—the *engine*—of a society is the *diversity* of outlook and aspiration among its individual members.

EITHER-OR *isn’t* the answer. What we *started* in 1776 and *perfected* in 1789 we must *build* upon: We must continue our American commitment to melding the *two* ‘sides’ of Jesus ... lifting up *both* the *individual* and the *collective*; committing to *both* the personal TRUTH WITHIN US *and* the common TRUTH FROM ABOVE ... to create a viable, vigorous and vibrant *whole*: a whole that will see us on well

³ This is only a rhetorical statement, to advance my argument: *Whatever* God wills succeeds, full stop.

on our way, under God, into our *next* two hundred fifty years. Jesus has *shown* us the way. May He also *provide* us the will.

THE REV DOUGLAS S WORTHINGTON
All Souls' Episcopal Church
San Diego, CA

© 2026 Douglas S Worthington, all rights reserved