

Let Us Remember!

This month we remember July 4, 1776 as Independence Day but it is actually our *DECLARATION of Independence Day*, for merely signing, quite literally, our John Hancock's on the declaration did not establish our independence. King George did not read the Declaration and then say to Thomas Jefferson, "Nice piece of writing Tom, y'all enjoy your USA, send me a postcard from Colonial Williamsburg." No, it took seven years of struggle before the Constitution could be written.

Have we forgotten the struggle involved in this noble experiment of democracy? Do we cherish this land or do we shy from a word like "Patriotism"? To be "patriotic" is not to be blind to our nation's sins. Like every nation, we have our weak points. We love our country, but none of us believes it is perfect. Indeed, in a principled democracy, not to speak up would be a lack of Patriotism. To be patriotic (*from the Greek PATRIS which means fatherland*) is to appreciate the sacrifice of our forefathers and foremothers who wanted this nation to be extraordinary. Many of them gave their lives that we might be free as a people, just as many people gave their lives that we might have our Christian faith. It is for us to maintain and to improve what they have passed on to us.

1st We maintain and to improve what they have passed on to us by Remembering Where We Have Come From!

We like to think we came from the aristocracy of Europe. Well, a few Americans may have, but most Americans are descendants of those "huddled masses yearning to be free" that Emma Lazarus wrote about several generations ago.

Her words are inscribed on our Statue of Liberty that stands proudly in the harbor of New York City to welcome millions of immigrants to America. Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* Who can read those words without being reminded of the words that grace our Statue of Liberty? *"Give me your tired, you're poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."*

When France was about to present America with a statue called "Liberty Enlightening the World," and America was to provide the pedestal, Emma Lazarus was approached to contribute a poem. Emma Lazarus wrote the poem, but in October 1886, when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, she was gravely ill with cancer and did not attend. She died a year later at the age of 38. Her life was short, but her words live on, engraved in the concrete of a statue of acceptance.

Except for our Native American friends, we are a *nation of immigrants*. None of naturally belong here! We trace our ancestry back to many kinds of people in many different lands. Maybe that is why it is our tradition as a nation to welcome the stranger with kindness and compassion. We will maintain and improve that which has been handed to us, first of all, when we remember where we came from.

2nd We maintain and to improve what they have passed on to us by Remembering What We Stand For!

Growing up in the black ghetto of Baltimore, young Thurgood Marshall was an early, though unwilling, student of the U.S. Constitution. Often in mischief, he was required to stay after school as punishment for his classroom antics. For each infraction of a rule, Marshall was required to memorize a portion of the Constitution. As a result, Marshall reported, he soon knew the whole thing by heart. Marshall's primary school teachers would have been astonished if they could have foreseen that their unruly pupil would one day put that knowledge into practice as a distinguished attorney, and then as this nation's first African-American United States Supreme Court Justice.

Wouldn't it be great if every American child could know our Constitution by heart? We are a people whose existence depends upon our sacred documents. The *Declaration*, the *Constitution*, the *Bill of Rights*. As Christians we would add another sacred document--the *Bible*--for *every principle we hold dear as Americans was first established in God's Word*. The words on the Statue of Liberty remind us where we came from. The *words in our sacred documents tell us what we stand for*.

3rd We maintain and to improve what they have passed on to us by Being Reminded of the Sacrifices that Have Been Made on Our Behalf. This land is ours because of those who have sacrificed on our behalf. Dick Abel came face-to-face with several prisoners of war in Vietnam. Abel was the first American these prisoners had seen after being held captive more than eight years. Some of the men Abel met had been in solitary confinement for four years! Later, Abel stood in awe

as he heard the leader of these POWs speak for the group in a message to the free world: "Thank you," said the leader on the group's behalf, "for the privilege of serving: God bless America!" This, from a group of men who were captives expressing their conviction that they were privileged to serve.

Don't think that there are no heroes left in this world. There are many men and women in this generation and in each generation over the past 200 plus years who have literally been willing to lay down their lives for this country. And we owe them a great debt. Part of what kept these men who were captives in Vietnam going was their faith in God.

Abel tells about one of the captives, Robbie Risner, using a wood dowel to painstakingly wear a hole through an 8-inch concrete wall. He accomplished this excruciating task so that he could share his faith in Jesus Christ with the man in the next cell, a man who later died. Abel tells of the group singing, "Amazing Grace" even under the most horrid of conditions.

This is the stuff of which our commitment as Americans to freedom, justice, and equality is made. Our faith helps us live out our commitment to freedom. Why? Because we understand that only in giving up some of our autonomy as individual citizens do we truly become free. In Jesus' time, oxen were linked together by means of a wooden yoke across their necks that helped to evenly distribute the weight of a load so that both oxen carried it. Together, they were able to pull far greater a load than either one could pull by itself.

When we are yoked to Christ we are better able to stand up for the things we believe. When we are yoked to Christ, we are better able to repay the sacrifices made in our behalf. So, as we reflect on the meaning of Independence Day, we thank God and we thank those dedicated persons who made it possible for us to worship in freedom this day. And we are thankful that on our Statue of Liberty still read those words that remind us of the words of Jesus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . "God bless America.