

For I am Gentle, Sermon on July 5, 2026, by Rev. R. Randy Day
Scripture Reading: Psalm 145, 8-14 and Mathew 11:16-19, 25-30

So here we are at the 250th anniversary of this nation. Some have been waiting to celebrate; some have been celebrating. I've talked to many of you over the last couple of weeks. Some of you are agonizing about where we are. I've read lots of essays, lots of statements by various churches, all kinds of things.

This morning, I want us to continue to celebrate.

I don't know what has touched you or what's touching you, but I watched Sail4th yesterday. Did anybody see the tall ships going into New York? I found myself writing this sermon at the same time—you know how we read three or four things at once—but I'd look up, and they were just magnificent. They're coming to Boston later.

We're a maritime nation, as you Cape Cod folks know for sure. Yesterday, more than 50 nations were participating with the ships and 15,000 sailors. We had flyovers involving 200 aircraft from many nations around the world. It was really quite spectacular.

Some of you probably watched and listened to the Boston Pops last night and enjoyed the fireworks in Boston. There were all kinds of celebrations across the Cape.

I went walking early, early yesterday morning in Plymouth, where I live, to beat the heat. There, way up on the hill overlooking Plymouth Rock, is that magnificent statue of a Native American woman looking over the harbor, remembering the Native Americans who were here before the Mayflower arrived in 1620. We are mindful of the first slave ship that arrived off the coast of Virginia the year before, in 1619—people who didn't intend to come here at all but came in chains, whereas those on the Mayflower came to escape religious tyranny.

There are all kinds of ways that we've celebrated. Some of you have been watching Ken Burns' series on the American Revolution, and some of you have been reading widely. I really enjoyed just hearing "The Star-Spangled Banner" this morning. It was unusual to have it in church as a prelude, but we had it, and it was great. We thank you for that.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling a bit down, I need to be lifted up. You know what I mean? You call out to Alexa or go on Google. One of my favorite things is to say, "Alexa, play the National Anthem by Whitney Houston." I love it. I become kind of emotional, and she sings it like no other.

A couple of weeks ago, while I was watching Whitney for inspiration, I snapped a picture and texted it to my wife. Unknown to me, she took the snapshot, enlarged it, and framed it. [Pastor holds up picture]. So, as of this 4th of July weekend, Whitney is going to live in the office upstairs and inspire future sermons. She sings it from her soul—that is for sure.

So, instead of getting lost in all kinds of essays and opinions—and you guys can read all that stuff until the cows come home, as they say—I thought it would be better to go to some of the primary sources. That's one way of celebrating the Declaration of Independence.

I want to quote from a couple of books this morning. One is *Friends Divided* by Gordon Wood, a history professor at Brown University. Any Brown graduates here? He does a really great job of looking at the lives of both Adams and Jefferson.

He said there could hardly be two people who were more different than Adams and Jefferson. Jefferson, the optimist, had enough faith in the goodness of human beings to become democracy's champion. Certainly, without a doubt, among the Founding Fathers, Jefferson did the most to produce the Declaration of Independence, though he certainly didn't do it by himself.

He was an aristocratic Southern slave owner, as most of you know, while Adams, here in Massachusetts, was the overachiever from the rising middling classes of New England, painfully aware that he was not an aristocrat, skeptical about popular rule, and a defender of a more elitist view of government.

So they were different in that way. They were also different in personality, and I'll touch on that in a few minutes.

Late in life, something remarkable happened. They became enemies, especially around the election of 1800. It was very bitter. The two parties were at each other. So if you think that's something new, go back and read about that election. The Jeffersonian Democrats (the Democratic-Republican Party) and the Federalists under Adams were really at each other. It was pretty nasty.

These two personally didn't get along. Later in life, it was a physician who decided to see if there could be a moment of reconciliation, and it happened.

First, the two former presidents started sending letters to each other rather grudgingly. Then things warmed up, and by the time they had exchanged letters over a period of years, they had become very close friends—Jefferson down at Monticello, Adams up here in the Boston area.

You may or may not know this, but it was exactly 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence that Mr. Adams took his last breath. One of the last things he said was, "At least Jefferson's still alive," on July 4th. But what he didn't know was that Jefferson had died that morning. Both men died on July 4, exactly 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Later, Adams told Daniel Webster—and Daniel Webster was our great orator—that Jefferson "was not graceful, not elegant, not always fluent, but with power of both thought and expression he moved us from our seats."

It seems from observers that Adams was always on his feet at the Continental Congress, moving around. He served on many committees. I read that committee meetings started around eight in the morning and went until ten. Then Congress would meet until about four in the afternoon. They'd finally break for dinner, and committees would meet again until about ten at night.

Some of you have been in the corporate world or the educational world. You know what that's like. Have you been delegates at conferences? I have. Two intense weeks, and you're doing that kind of schedule.

They were doing it for months and months without air conditioning in Philadelphia. If you've watched the musical *1776*, one of the funny parts is that they were divided between those who wanted to close the windows to keep the flies out and those who wanted to open the windows to let fresh air in.

They debated everything. They had only a handful of staff to help them. Otherwise, they did everything—new national policy and this, that, and the other.

Adams was very clear about independence. You can read the letters. You can find the quotes. I found one that says that no patriot in the decade leading up to the Revolution defended with more passion the common, ordinary people against those who would rule them.

Adams wrote:

“The people are ridden like horses, fleeced like sheep, worked like cattle, and fed and clothed like swine and hounds.”

So here we are, 250 years later, and it was Jefferson who put pen to paper there in Philadelphia and worked with the rest of the committee.

Jefferson's words seem to take flight:

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

Many will point out that Jefferson, like most of us sitting in this room, was a complicated person. He was not a saint, nor was he a devil.

Yes, he enslaved more than 600 Black people, including members of his own extended family.

It is also true that this Declaration, which he penned, has been copied—or at least adapted—in more than 120 nations around the world. I spent a lot of time in Africa, and I know many African nations have taken Jefferson's Declaration, changed a few phrases, and basically used the same framework.

Did the churches have a role in this? Is there a role for God? People will argue in different ways.

But I will say that here in Massachusetts, after the signing at the Continental Congress and the ringing of the bell, local congregations were encouraged to read the Declaration during worship services just like this one. It

was done in many congregations—Congregational churches, Unitarian churches, Catholic churches, and many others. It was read widely.

I also want to quote from a fascinating book, *Most Blessed of the Patriots: Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination*. It's a wonderful title—*The Empire of the Imagination*. I highly recommend it.

It's written by Annette Gordon-Reed, a professor at Harvard Law School, and Peter Onuf, who has long been associated with the Jefferson Library.

They talk about Jefferson holding people in bondage while, at the same time, possessing this remarkable empire of imagination.

Jefferson spoke and read Greek, Latin, French, and English. He was a powerful intellectual. His library at Monticello was magnificent. He was very quiet, but people at the Congress knew immediately that this was the man who could write. They passed around samples of his writing and found him quite different from the others. The others had different gifts, so they leaned on him in many ways.

But he was also attacked in many ways. That's no surprise. Politicians attacked each other back then, too.

Why were they attacking Jefferson?

They said he was an atheist—that he didn't believe in God. They repeated that over and over. They claimed he didn't use enough God language.

In one campaign they even said that if Jefferson were elected, first of all, all the Bibles would be burned, and secondly, there would be incest throughout the land. Where they came up with that, I have no idea, but that's what they were saying.

Later in life, there is a chapter in this book called "The Religious Quest." By his own writings and letters, Jefferson seemed to delve deeply into religion.

Some ask whether it was because he had been attacked for so long and wanted to defend himself, or whether it was because he was becoming aware of his own mortality. Perhaps it was a combination of both.

In any case, the records show that he spent an enormous amount of time reading and studying religious texts from many different traditions, but he was especially drawn to Christianity. He read the biblical texts in Greek, Latin, French, and English. He compared the passages where there were differences and tried to determine what he believed was the most accurate. It became a kind of cut-and-paste project.

I've mentioned before what we call the Jefferson Bible. It was more than simply cutting out the words of Jesus, although he focused primarily on what Jesus said. He worked through all these translations over many weeks and months.

Did that make him a spiritual person? Perhaps.

Did it make him a saint? No.

People point out that, by his own writings, he did not see Jesus as the Messiah. He never referred to Jesus Christ. Those of us who are Christians may find that a bit unusual. He always referred to Him as Jesus of Nazareth. Jefferson basically saw Jesus as a philosopher—and a very good one. He dismissed all the miracles.

In the Jefferson Bible there is not one miracle. He said the miracles were distractions. He wanted to get to what he believed was the essence of Jesus.

You can take it or leave it. Many people find that shocking.

So he was no atheist, but he certainly was no fundamentalist either. He had his own version of Christianity.

Today, in our own versions of Christianity, there are many things for us to be cautious about, because religion can be used and misused, especially when it comes to national events. Many of our denominational leaders across the Protestant churches, as well as Catholic leaders, are warning us again and again about white nationalism, which seems to be on the rise in this country.

We want to be conscious of that, especially as we think about our sisters and brothers in Native communities, Black communities, and among immigrants.

We are a nation of immigrants. What else could we possibly be?

We know that God will be with us as we look to the future of this country.

The Declaration says, “all men,” using the language of its day. We must continue to ensure that we are including everyone.

You know it’s Lincoln—we’ve talked about Lincoln many times here. Four score and seven years later, at Gettysburg, Lincoln referred back to this Declaration that we celebrate today. Some call that the second birth of the nation because it finally addressed the issue of slavery, which had been set aside in order for the Declaration to gain enough votes from the Southern colonies.

So 87 years passed. Then came the Emancipation Proclamation, and we moved on from there.

But much earlier, one of the principles upon which this country was established was religious freedom. Some people say we were not established as a Christian nation. That’s true. We were established with religious freedom, including the freedom to be Christian if one chooses.

It’s George Washington’s letter to the Jewish congregation in Newport that’s one of the great American documents. They were experiencing discrimination, and Washington wrote:

“For happily the Government of the United States... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...” He continued by saying that the government requires only that those who live under its protection “demean themselves as good citizens.”

It was a year later that the First Amendment was passed, and many see Washington’s letter to the Jewish congregation in Newport as helping shape that discussion.

Very, very important.

So we thank Washington. We thank all the others. Democracy is not guaranteed. It depends upon the citizens. As Benjamin Franklin reminded us, it depends on all of us—in the churches, the synagogues, the mosques, and everywhere else—if we wish to continue to have a republic, a democratic republic, for our children, our grandchildren, and all those who will celebrate another 250 years beyond now.

I know that the God of the ages will help us.

As the psalmist said:

“The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.”

That is the better principle in this country.

And Jesus said in Matthew:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

May it be so. As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of this nation, may it be so for all nations. And may it especially be so for the ministry of this Congregational Church.