

Seeking the Welfare of the Place We Call Home

As Independence Day approaches, many of us will gather with family and friends, watch fireworks light the sky, share meals, and give thanks for the freedoms we enjoy in this nation. It is appropriate to celebrate the gifts of our country and to be grateful for those who have sacrificed to preserve its freedoms.

As Christians, however, our faith invites us to think carefully about the difference between patriotism and nationalism.

One of the most remarkable passages in Scripture comes from the prophet Jeremiah. Writing to God's people living in exile, far from the home they loved, Jeremiah tells them: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7).

Notice what Jeremiah does not say. He does not tell God's people to withdraw from society, nor does he tell them to place their ultimate trust in any earthly power. Instead, he calls them to love the place where they live, work for the common good, and pray for their neighbors.

That is patriotism at its best.

Patriotism is love of country. It is gratitude for the blessings we have received and a commitment to help our communities flourish. Patriotism acknowledges both the strengths and shortcomings of a nation and seeks to help it live more fully into its highest ideals. It inspires service, generosity, civic engagement, and care for our neighbors.

Nationalism, on the other hand, elevates the nation above all other loyalties. It can tempt us to believe that our country is inherently superior to others or that our national identity should take precedence over our identity as followers of Jesus. Where patriotism invites humility, nationalism often demands unquestioning allegiance.

For Christians, our ultimate allegiance belongs to God. In baptism, we become citizens of a kingdom that transcends every border, language, ethnicity, and nation. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). This does not make us less engaged in the life of our communities or our country. Rather, it shapes how we engage them. Because our citizenship is in heaven, we are free to work for justice, mercy, compassion, and reconciliation wherever God has planted us.

This year, our Fourth of July observance also coincides with the anniversary of the devastating floods that affected communities across our synod in 2025. As we remember those who lost homes, livelihoods, and precious possessions, we also remember the countless acts of compassion that followed. Congregations opened their doors. Neighbors helped neighbors. Volunteers showed up with meals, supplies, prayers, and helping hands.

In those difficult days, we witnessed something deeper than patriotism. We witnessed the Body of Christ at work.

We saw people seeking the welfare of their communities. We saw neighbors crossing political, economic, geographic, and cultural boundaries to care for one another. We saw the church living out its baptismal calling. We were reminded that love of neighbor is not simply an ideal—it is a way of life.

As we celebrate the Fourth of July, may we give thanks for our nation and for the freedoms we enjoy. May we pray for our leaders, our communities, and our neighbors. May we remember those still recovering from disaster and those facing new challenges today.

And may we hold together the wisdom of Jeremiah and Paul: to seek the welfare of the places where God has planted us while remembering that our deepest citizenship belongs to God's kingdom.

As people who are always **Becoming / En Proceso**—becoming more faithful disciples, more courageous leaders, more welcoming neighbors, and more compassionate communities—may we bear witness to a love that is wider than any border and stronger than any division. In a world often marked by fear and separation, may our lives point to the One who is drawing all people together in grace.

May God bless our nation. And may God continue to shape us into people whose deepest loyalty is to the transforming love of Jesus Christ.

Love, Bishop Sue