The Rev. James Richardson  
Trinity Cathedral, Sacramento  
Independence Day 2019

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] 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.”

As you know, today marks the 243rd anniversary of Declaration of Independence and the founding of our nation. You may rightly wonder why we have a church service on this most secular of our national holidays.

There are many reasons. For one, it is a day of thanksgiving for the nation’s independence, and it is meet and right to give God thanks and praise for the freedoms we have inherited, for this abundant land that we are responsible for stewarding for the next generations, and for all the blessings we enjoy.

Another reason to mark this day: This is the birthday of the Episcopal Church where you now sit.

The independence of the United States from its mother country, and the independence of the Episcopal Church from its mother church, are deeply and inextricably intertwined on this day.

I like to tell how this is so each year on the Fourth of July, so please bear with me as I tell it again:

In colonial America, there was only one official religion: The Church of England. And the Church of England, for all practical purposes, was synonymous with the British Empire.

And the most important Church of England church in America was Christ Church, Philadelphia, located across from what is now known as Independence Square. Christ Church had the tallest steeple in America, and that was as much a statement about the primacy of the British Empire as it was about the primacy of God.

Anyone who was anyone in colonial America walked through the doors of Christ Church, Philadelphia, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton, all good members of the Church of England.
And so was that on July 4, 1776, the rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, the Rev. Jacob Duche´ — who was also the chaplain to the Continental Congress — watched the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

He then proceeded to walk across the square to Christ Church, open the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer, and began crossing out all references to the King of England.

Duche´ replaced to the British monarch in the prayer book with the “United States of America.” This was no mere editing of the prayer book. Duche´’s pen struck a blow not just against a colonial power, but also against the idea that government could dictate to its people the religion they were to follow.

It can be fairly said that the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America was born in that moment.

In this new nation, there would be no established church and no official state religion. Monarchs and governments would not be in charge of the peoples’ souls – or their conscience.

In the United States of America, all religions would have the same opportunity to win the hearts and minds of people, and the people would be guided by the dictates of their own conscience. A few years later, in 1789, this principle would be codified as the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Yet freedom of conscience would mean nothing if people have no conscience. And having a conscience would mean nothing if people did not act on their conscience.

And that leads to a realm that makes many good faithful people squeamish – politics – and with good reason. Politics, especially these days, is divisive, toxic and fraught with peril.

But, if you take a step back and look at the Bible as a whole, it tells the story of judges and kings, their triumphs and failures. It tells the stories of good leaders and corrupt leaders, wolves in sheep’s clothing. The Bible tells the age-old story of human politics. Politics, after all, is how we structure relationships in a society.

At its core, the Bible outlines laws – many laws – with the aim that people will live peaceably and fairly with each other. Those who wrote the Bible well understood that laws would not work if people were left behind by circumstances beyond their control, or the enforcement of laws unequally.
We hear of this today from the Book of Deuteronomy — the law book of the Hebrew Scriptures: “The Lord your God …is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.”

The founders of this nation struggled with how to establish a government based on these principles. They established a democratic form of government — or as Abraham Lincoln would say, of the people, by the people, for the people.

They saw this form of government as more than about a structure for making laws and creating public policy. They saw it as a means to *unite* this unfinished nation across its many divides.

It is no accident that this country is named the *United* States of America.

The founders declared all men are *created* equal, but they were tripped up more than once by the stark fact that not all men — and no women — were *treated* equal.

Some were held in bondage, and slavery tore the country to pieces right from the start, culminating in a terrible civil war that ended slavery but left new issues of equality that still live with us.

The founders also knew that it would take more than the force of arms to protect this form of government. They were, in fact, suspicious of having a standing army and navy, feeling armies and navies could be manipulated by monarchs and depots.

They trusted that more powerful than any army would be the people — all the people — by their participation in their government.

And that brings me to now.

A few days ago, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States, Michael Curry — a black man, the descendant of slaves and sharecroppers, the inheritor of Jacob Duché’s church — was here at Trinity Cathedral.

Bishop Curry convened the clergy of this diocese right where you sit this morning, and he talked at length about the erosion of democracy all over the globe.

Bishop Curry emphasized that he was not talking about whether we are Blue or Red, liberal or conservative, or vote this way or that.
Rather, he underlined that democracy is based on relationships – honest relationships built with respectful listening, and respectful dialogue. Democracy is built upon the truths of our individual stories.

And that is where this old Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America has a role. We know how to build relationships across our differences. We even know how to be polite.

Democracy, of course, requires more than politeness, though even politeness is now in short supply in the political realm.

Democracy requires a deep sense by all of us about how each of us matters, how everyone has a place, and how everyone has a truth to tell. And Democracy requires more than that. It requires embracing each other in love, not just when it is easy, but when it is hard.

Jesus sets our standard, and the standard is high:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

Who better follow this way of love than us? And if not us, then who?