



# **An Ever-More Perfect Union**

**By**

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Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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## **First Lesson | Nehemiah 9:1-3, 6-8, 10:28-29**

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth part of the day, and for another fourth they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God.

And Ezra said, “You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham; and you found his heart faithful before you and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous. The rest of the people, the priests, the

Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to adhere to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their kin, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes.

## **Second Lesson | Peter 2:9-10**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

## **Sermon**

One of the things I appreciate most about international travel is the way it allows me to see the United States

differently. Some of that insight comes from learning how other nations address such things as education and health care, mass transit, and defense. More of it comes from talking with locals, as each conversation gives me a new perspective on this country and theirs. It happened on our most recent trip to Iceland and Greenland, and my first time overseas.

43 years ago, I traveled to the United Kingdom. A shared language helped immensely as I quickly learned to read train schedules and which way to look when crossing the street, how to convert pounds to dollars, and absorb the culture. I got a bit overconfident in my adaptation as one day, toward the end of my stay, I called for a taxi. Knowing that two cities spelled the same way are pronounced Birmingham in the US and Birming-um in the UK, when the dispatcher asked for a name, I replied “Willing-um.” “Say again?” I repeated my pronunciation. He still didn’t get it and asked me to spell it. When I did, he said, “Oh, you mean Willingham.”

More significant than that embarrassing encounter were two other moments when I gained insight into my home country. While there, the G7 Summit was

happening in Williamsburg, Virginia. I was having dinner in a pub when the TV news turned to the G7. I was struck by how the camera and reporter’s focus were on Margaret Thatcher and not Ronald Reagan. That was as it should be, but I knew the coverage would be quite different here.

The next day, I took the train from London to the Lake District. The station was not at town center, and with funds running low, I chose to walk. An older man offered me a ride, and as we rode along, he said, “You’re an American, aren’t you?” I said “yes” with some hesitation, knowing that our citizenry isn’t always viewed positively overseas. He replied, “We owe a lot to the Americans” and recounted the difference this country had made in World War II and the rebuilding. I felt great pride. He then asked me how long I was staying in his community. Upon learning I would only be there 24 hours, he replied, “That’s just like you Americans. You think you can see everything quickly. I’ve lived here all my life and still have more to see!”

Both comments seem instructive to me on the occasion of our country’s 250th birthday. I’ve pondered for weeks how

to speak to this moment and a nation I love. As a fan of history, I have overdone it with documentaries, articles, and books describing the people and events of the American Revolution and what has happened since. Even with all that data, my brief encounter with a British man four decades ago offers the approach I will use this morning.

The Fourth of July recounts that day in 1776 when the Second Continental Congress approved a resolution known as the Declaration of Independence. Fifty-six men, including Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon, added their names to a document, an act of treason to the British crown. I have great respect for all that they risked in declaring the start of something different. Yet that resolution spoke not only to the colonies, but also to the world. At least half of the countries represented in the United Nations have declarations that draw from its principles.

Still, in preparing for this moment, I found myself thinking about a different foundational document, the U.S. Constitution. It was adopted at the Pennsylvania Statehouse, too, 11 years after Thomas Jefferson's work, and opens:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union.” I’d like to ponder our part in creating that kind of nation.

Our Biblical lessons today have something to say to that task. Neither, of course, talks about the United States, yet both speak about nations and the human role in perfecting them.

The first recalls a moment when the people of ancient Israel had returned from exile.

The Old Testament book of Ezra tells of how the people first rebuilt the temple that had been destroyed when they were taken into captivity. Years after its dedication, the governor Nehemiah leads them in the effort to rebuild the city walls, too. It is then that the priest Ezra sets out to restore the religious life of the people, calling them to honor the law of God. Our reading comes from the 9th chapter of the Book of Nehemiah. My study Bible calls it a “National Confession”

It opens with Ezra recounting some of the glories from that nation's past. “You are the LORD,” he exclaimed, “the God

who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham...you made with him a covenant...and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.” In words that we did not hear, the priest goes on to recount how, in the years that followed, God rescued the people from Egyptian slavery, led them through the wilderness, gave them the law, and fed them with manna and water. Ezra proceeds to recount how God ensured possession of the land promised to Abram but years later allowed the Israelites to be taken into Babylonian captivity due to their disobedience. “Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”

As the book moves into the tenth chapter, Ezra tells of a covenant that the people have created, declaring a new commitment to follow God’s law. 84 men are named as signers of that foundational document. Yet then, “all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to adhere to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their kin, their nobles, and enter into a curse and

an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given by Moses, the servant of God, and to overseers and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes.” Thus, in two chapters, Ezra celebrated their nation’s past, named missteps along the way, and made a vow from the people to create a more perfect union. The covenant was for themselves, but also for the world.

Each of those pieces is an appropriate part of our response as people of faith to this moment in American history, too. To name the best of what this country is about and has accomplished, to give voice to the moments when we were or are off track from the Founder’s ideals and articulate our commitment to be part of an ever-more perfect union moving forward. Perhaps that topic can be part of your lunch conversation or in the coming days. Since I am the one suggesting such a discussion, let me share how I would answer, at least on this day.

If forced to choose only three events from our country’s past that I celebrate, the first, to no surprise, would be the freedom of religion our Founders established, protecting us from

government oversight while not favoring one faith over another. I remain inspired by the courage and skill of Abraham Lincoln in a time of national crisis to begin the process that ended human slavery. And I give thanks for the decision by Congress 110 years ago to create the National Park Service, ensuring incredible natural beauty is still here for generations yet unborn.

Among moments I lament from our nation's past are how it took 144 years before women got the vote, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and how pollutants flowed freely into the water, soil, and air for decades. All of those flaws were addressed, of course, which makes clear that it's possible still to become an ever-more perfect union.

Some of the items I would put on a list needing attention would include the tone of public discourse that feels angrier than ever. I lament a widening gap between the haves and have-nots as well, and how, despite living in the wealthiest nation, nearly 11% of its citizens live below the poverty level. And, as one who grew up in the South during an era of segregated schools and open gatherings of the

KKK, it pains me to see acts of injustice involving race continue to occur.

Your list will be different from mine, of course, but I invite you to begin such reflection. Not only does it feel like a fitting response to this nation's semi-quincentennial, but it also grows out of the fact that the United States, from its beginning, has been a witness to the world.

Our second lesson underscores that reality. It comes from a letter written by Peter that has as its overriding message how followers of Christ are to live in a way that others will notice. "You are a chosen people," he declares, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

An entire sermon could be spent addressing all that such words do and do not mean, but on this day, as our nation begins its 251st year since declaring freedom, I would suggest that Peter's words remind us that the world still pays attention to what we do. Every time I travel overseas, I witness the influence of American products, movies, ideas, and trends. Which suggests creating a more perfect union will impact our 50 states,

to be sure, but also the globe.

Consider, for instance, what has emerged from the FIFA World Cup. I have not attended a match or taken part in the fan experience at Fairmount Park, but have actively followed reports of what has occurred on and off the field. I have loved reading about how communities like Chattanooga, TN, and Lawrence, KS, have shown incredible hospitality to the team from Spain and Algeria, respectively, who used their cities as training sites. I have been amused by the phenomenon of something known as the Viking Row, where stadiums filled with fans, Dallas police officers on an airport tarmac, and Norwegian legislators respond to a beating drum by lifting their hands and emulating a rower. I've enjoyed hearing how Scottish fans charmed Boston and the amazement of visitors over seeing American flags on homes and the size of our personal vehicles, and such culinary surprises as cheesesteak, ranch dressing, and free coffee refills.

Yet the best part has been the reactions of guests to the citizens of our country. "It's hard to sit there and think Americans are bad," said one man, "because every single person I've met that's American

has been wonderful." "I'm not trying to be offensive at all," commented another, "So far, every American has been incredibly friendly, but man, you guys are loud." "It's not like what the news portrays," added someone. "You have beautiful scenery and people." In response, one Texan posted a comment saying, "Despite everything, this is still America. We may not know your name, your language or basic world history, but by god you're not leaving here without a plate of barbecue and three people telling you to be safe on the way home."

What will make for an ever-more perfect union? You and I will answer that question differently. Such diverse perspective is another thing that I love about this country.

Yet what we can all agree on is that we are not a perfect nation and never will be. Still, as individuals who have committed our lives to the only one who is perfect and holy, we can still join our voices, our hands, and our prayers in moving this land closer to the ideals articulated 250 years ago. Knowing that just as was true on the 4th day of July in 1776, the world is still watching what we do. And far more importantly, God is watching, too.

