



**July 2, 2006**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

John 10:11-18; 27-30

## “Who can we trust? Jesus!”

I grew up the child of parents who both served in the navy. My father was what they called a “90 day wonder” during World War II. These were young men who, having completed their bachelor’s degrees, were given 90 days of military instruction, then were commissioned as officers and given a command. My dad was a stores officer on a ship in the Pacific.

My mom was a WAVE. This was the term for women in the navy back then. Women who served in the army were WAC’s. My mother never left the U.S., but had some adventures serving in Georgia and other parts of the U.S. My mother shared a lot of things she didn’t like about the navy, but she’d always say, “Oh, but if they had a parade with a marching band, and flags waving in the wind, I’d sign up again.”

My mother also taught me about our family genealogy. Somebody back in the family tree came over on the Mayflower, because my mom was able to join an organization called “Colonial Dames”. She was Regent of the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) and we belong to a group called the “Descendents of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence” because our family traces back to Richard Henry Lee of Virginia. We sometimes jokingly refer to George Washington as “Uncle George” because we descend from his brother, John Augustine Washington.

I grew up feeling proud of my country. I learned about the sacrifices made by the signers of the Declaration of Independence, many of whom were captured and killed, their families arrested or scattered, their properties looted, ransacked and burned. These men were educated, many of them wealthy. They had a lot to lose by bucking the powers-that-be of their day. But they pledged: “For the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of the Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”  
Wow.

I loved the story of Dolly Madison's bravery during the War of 1812 against Great Britain. The war was not popular. New England was in a virtual state of secession. The governor of Vermont ordered the state militia to resign from national service. In Massachusetts there was talk of negotiating a separate peace with the enemy. The British actually attacked the capital in 1814. The citizens of Washington streamed out of the city into Virginia. Even the militia assigned to protect the White House deserted their posts. But First Lady Dolly Madison refused to budge. Before the White House was burned, Dolly saved her husband's papers, a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence, and a valuable portrait of George Washington. When news of the British burning the White House, and of Dolly Madison's courage and daring spread through the nation, the tide of public opinion turned. The British were willing to sign a peace treaty six months later.

I loved the fact that my people were brave and willing to sacrifice. When I lived in Europe as a teenager, I visited a concentration camp where thousands of Jews and other "undesirables" were executed by the Nazis during WW II. I was horrified and saddened beyond words, but also proud that my country was a part of the Allied Forces that liberated the camps.

Many years later I visited Omaha Beach, where the invasion on D-Day led to that liberation and ultimate victory. I wept as I gazed at the long expanses of shoreline. So many died. So many gave their lives.

Today, on this Independence Day Week-end, we remember with gratitude those who have sacrificed for us—for you and for me.

I love this country. I've lived outside the U.S. at several times during my life- as a teenager in Austria, as young wife and mother in Quebec and Germany. Those experiences have revealed to me much of what I hold dear. I am not, however, a person who has difficulty criticizing this country. I am aware that our nation is not perfect, and am willing to discuss those realities, much the way many of us might point out imperfections in a beloved spouse or sibling.

Many years ago, a family member from France was staying with us for several weeks. We were talking about something very trivial, like the times of day people eat their meals or something like that. My French family member, not suspecting the comment would upset me, said something about how "the common people" (le peuple) in France eat dinner a bit earlier than others.

Without thinking I reacted violently. It's almost as though I stood up on a chair, waved a flag and started a recording of the national anthem. I went on about how my country is founded on the notion of the PEOPLE—that our declaration of independence speaks of "We the People" and that the people are who matter and

the people have precious worth and ultimate value and should be respected.....etc. etc. etc. My poor relative started patting me on the arm and saying, “Of course, you are right—we are ALL the people and we all matter.”

As I’ve reflected on that incident over the last 30 years, I’ve come to a conclusion. I cherish the way our nation has affirmed the importance of each person, and attended to the empowerment of every person, without regard to race, gender, national origin, education or material possessions. I cherish this because it is the way God says we are to be. Every person on the face of the earth is a priceless gem, to be valued and respected.

I love it when we do what God wants us to- when we do that as a church, as a community, as a nation. Many leaders of our country have believed that’s what should guide us in all we do. That’s why the words, “In God we Trust” are printed on our currency.

The problem is, that in our love for our country, we sometimes get this all upside down and backwards. We start to think that, since we trust in God, he’s our secret weapon, and we carry him around in a back pocket. We proclaim, “In God we Trust”, thinking “You better behave or we’ll just pull God out of that back pocket and zap you good!”

Friends, this is very childish theology. It’s the theology that led my children to pray table prayers like this: “Dear God, please teach my brother to stop acting like an idiot. Keep him out of my room and help him to grow up and quit being so immature.” We had to teach our children that this is not prayer, it’s a club you’ve disguised as a prayer. It’s not respect for God, but an attempt to make God a personal errand boy.

God calls us to trust him. He is the only entity worthy of our absolute trust. As Christians our primary allegiance is to God, made known to us in Jesus. Our allegiance to our country must always be AFTER our allegiance to God. The same goes for our loyalty to family and other loved ones. Only WHEN and IF our country or loved one is moving the direction GOD desires, only THEN should we appropriately support them.

We are to humbly sit at Christ’s feet, asking for wisdom, guidance and direction. The saying, “In God we Trust” names this as an ideal for our country just as it is the ideal for our personal lives.

Trusting God requires humility. It demands that we recognize our limits—limits of understanding, limits of power, limits of wisdom.

We are not very good at this. Humility is not a national character trait. It doesn't operate really well for us in our personal lives, and it's not terribly characteristic of our national life. This has been recognized for almost 150 years. In the words of Abraham Lincoln: "We have forgotten the gracious Hand which has preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own."

It's ironic to me that the words, "In God we Trust" are printed on our money-- because so much of our culture is based on trust in money. Money is power. Money offers freedom. Money opens the door to the good life. Money almost convinces us that we can overcome limits on our power, wisdom and understanding.

At this time of national celebration, hear again the call to humbly put your trust in God. When our primary trust is in our nation we don't know where to turn in situations like the terrorist acts of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>. When we learned there were warnings about the high potential for terrorists to hijack a plane and crash it into a key national building—warnings given PRIOR to Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>—we felt outrage and horror. Where were the authorities who should be protecting us, where were the safeguards, who will make our homeland secure?

Brothers and sisters, no **human** power can fully protect us. In GOD we trust. God, who revealed his love for us by becoming flesh, by laying down his life for us. Through Christ we are promised security. Our lives are held in his love no matter what. In Christ's words of today's Gospel text: "My sheep listen to my voice... I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Christ in this passage of Scripture also says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen". In addition to hearing Christ's promises of love and security today, I pray we will also hear his clear statement that his flock is not a private club. As we love God, and trust and serve him, we are a part of a vast throng of persons from every race and tribe and nation under the sun. Christianity is not an American religion. If we really plan to live out the saying, "In God we Trust", our concern for our brothers, our love for our sisters will extend across the globe.

Who can we trust? Jesus. When we trust Jesus, we are free to be his people, to do what is right. Even if the White House is burning. Because we know that our lives are held in the palm of his hand. Our lives are secure- **EVEN IF DEATH COMES TO CLAIM US---** our lives will never be snatched out of the hands of our Shepherd.

IN GOD WE TRUST. Really? Do we really?

Brothers and Sisters, trust God. Listen for his voice, seek to know his will and then live it—in your personal life, in your work life, in our national life. And to God be all the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.