Here’s a 4th of July question: “What ignites a flame of patriotism in you?” Watching World Cup Soccer games? Cheering for the US Hockey team during the winter Olympics? Seeing Serena Williams win her fourth Wimbledon singles title yesterday? Maybe your heart swells with patriotic fervor when you hear the national anthem sung before a Blue Rocks game, or played in variations on the organ by Paul? Perhaps observing a flag ceremony stirs your heart, or visiting Independence Hall and the Constitution Center in Philadelphia, the mall and national monuments in DC, or driving by Arlington National Cemetery.

There is much to celebrate about our country – its inspiring heritage and fiercely won freedoms, its remarkable ethnic diversity and rich national resources, its representational form of government based in large part on our own Presbyterian polity. As a friend of mine put it so succinctly, “I would not want to live anywhere else.” We live in a relatively young country, by the world standards, a country whose birth was founded on sacred human freedoms, and whose leaders fashioned a constitution ensuring basic human rights. Of course, it has taken time for those rights to be extended to everyone – blacks gained the right to vote just after the civil War in 1867, and women were not permitted to vote until 1920 – less than a century ago! Fortunately, our constitution is a work in progress, like our own church constitution.

We have a lot for which to be thankful. Moreover, when we see how our country responds to disasters around the world – the Tsunami in 2004, or the recent earthquake in Haiti, we swell with pride over our benevolence, and our leadership among the nations of the world. But pride in country can go too far.

In his book The Legacy of the Second World War, historian John Lukacs extols patriotism but warns of nationalism. Many aspects of patriotism are natural, good, and even admirable. But there's also a toxic patriotism which Lukacs calls nationalism (and it was just such nationalism which Hitler exploited in Nazi Germany). Nationalism, as Christian writer CS Lewis observed, believes that my nation is "markedly superior to all others.” Once when he encountered a pastor who espoused such noxious nationalism, CS Lewis asked him, "doesn't every nation think of itself as the best?" The clergyman responded in all seriousness, "Yes, but in England it is true." Lewis concluded, "To be sure, this conviction had not made my friend (God rest his soul) a villain; only an extremely lovable old ass.” Lewis went on to say that this myopic nationalism can also produce not so lovable asses, but asses that kick and bite. On the lunatic fringe it may evolve into racism which Christianity and science equally forbid.

In his weekly blog JourneywithJesus.net Dan Clendenin writes, “Christians ought to be geographic, cultural, national and ethnic egalitarians; (because) for us there is no geographic center of the world, but only a constellation of points equidistant from the heart of God.” His words emphasize how the Gospel of Christ proclaims that God lavishly loves all the world, each person, and every place. Therefore, no country – not even ours – is a favorite son or daughter of God. No country - not even ours – deserves special privileges. Rather, with America’s
tremendous natural resources and disproportionate wealth, come great responsibilities to care for
God’s creation and to work for liberty and justice for all God’s children.ii

Recently I came across this pithy prayer in *Children’s Letters to God*. From Robert, age 7: *Dear God, I am American, what are you?* It sounds funny to us, but at times I daresay we often act as though we believe God is American, or at least that God loves us best.

In our scripture today the apostle Paul declares, “But our citizenship is in heaven.” Other translations may read, “our home is in heaven, or our commonwealth is in heaven.” These were strong words to the people of Philippi whose patriotism ran high being a Roman colony. Paul is essentially saying that followers of Christ are called to a distinctively different way of life. His words remind us today that our first allegiance is always to God, for we are children of God, members of God’s family, inhabitants of God’s realm. We are Americans whose core identity is Christian, followers of Christ.

When I attended seminary (over thirty years ago) the first required course was Church History, taught by Dr. Robert Paul, an older and very proper British professor. Dr. Paul could get enraptured with the intricacies of the Council of Constantinople or the persecution of Anabaptists, and drone on and on. But I’ll never forget his last lecture. In it he proposed that church history all boils down to the issue of authority. He urged us to note the subtle but important differences in churches – how we govern, how we interpret scripture. Dr. Paul’s last lecture in church history still prompts me to address this issue in new member classes. I like to remind members that our authority is not a pope, nor a pastor, nor our General Assembly (which begins its bi-annual meeting today in Minneapolis!) nor even scripture, but Jesus Christ – our living Lord whom we come to know through scripture, but whose words and witness live today in the baptized community who seek to follow him and live out his compassion, justice and peace.

In our lifetime we have witnessed people whose allegiance to Christ has put them at odds with the authority of nation. Many who marched in the South during the Civil Rights Movement trod that path because they knew there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, black nor white nor red nor yellow, in the body of Christ, and that God loves all the world. Many others protested the Vietnam War or withheld taxes during the Cold War, understanding themselves subject to a higher authority in life: Christ, who reminds us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

On a holiday like the Fourth of July, we are reminded of the inner struggles of allegiance. We celebrate this land that we love, and rightly so, and yet we must always be careful that our allegiance to country never supersedes nor is equivalent to our allegiance to God. We struggle to love our country when our government acts in ways we feel are contrary to God’s ways of justice and peace; but we love our country by calling it to God’s ways of justice and peace.iii

Paul’s reminder that we are citizens of heaven points us to a more expansive view of life – or at least to the world in which we live. Do you remember the first time you glimpsed a photograph of the earth taken from space? Imagine what that view must be like from a spacecraft, for an astronaut! For many at NASA, it has been a spiritual experience, a sacred
moment, an epiphany, a time of seeing the big picture. One such space traveler, Don Williams said, “For those who have seen the Earth from space, and for the hundreds and perhaps thousands more who will, the experience most certainly changes your perspective. The things that we share in our world are far more valuable than those which divide us.”

How do we hold on to this big picture? By coming to Christ’s Table. For here Christ invites all who hunger for grace and thirst for peace, here Christ feeds us with love and faith and spiritual strength, and from here Christ sends us out as citizens of heaven, to be his body in a beautiful, fragile and needy world.

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i [http://www.journeywithjesus.net/](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/)

ii [http://www.journeywithjesus.net/](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/)

iii From sermon by W. Gregory Pope “The Inner Struggle”

iv [http://www.solarviews.com/eng/earthsp.htm#quote](http://www.solarviews.com/eng/earthsp.htm#quote)