

**NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER MEDITATION  
HADDONFIELD, MAY 5, 2005 – REV. DR. PATRICK R. CLOSE**

**(A Prayer of Self-Dedication, Book of Common Prayer, page 832) “Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray you, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”**

**What an interesting day this is, to think that we are gathered for a national Day of Prayer. The goal is to pray for our country, our people and our leaders. We do that every time we gather for worship in my Church. I suspect that this is what happens in many congregations when they meet. What is the purpose then of this day? What was the intent of the original framers of the event? What has it evolved into today?**

**According to the National Day of Prayer website, the day is a part of our heritage. They mention how the Continental Congress called on the colonies to pray for wisdom in the forming of the nation. That sounds to me a reasonable request. In 1863, during the Civil War, President Lincoln called for a day of “humiliation, fasting and prayer.” I was deeply moved when I read this proclamation. I will come back to this in a moment. In 1952, President Truman signed a joint resolution by Congress calling for an annual, national day of prayer. However, the focus shifted to celebrating freedom of worship and religion in our country. I have noticed that it has become more like a pep rally rather than a day of solemn prayer. There is an inherent danger here that the focus moves away from God to us.**

**I would like to see us reclaim the spirit of this day that Abraham Lincoln intended. President Lincoln was living in a time when the nation was divided by war. His proclamation for a “National Fast Day” was issued on March 30<sup>th</sup> and the day observed a month later. This was three months before the fateful battle of Gettysburg, July 1<sup>st</sup> that would mark a dramatic turn in the war. The nation was near collapse and the end of the war was nowhere in sight.**

**The proclamation called for a day of prayer and humiliation! Lincoln called on the people to acknowledge their dependence on God, to confess their sins and transgressions, to express sorrow, ask for forgiveness and seek mercy and pardon. I don’t have the same sense of urgency in today’s observance as then. Perhaps, the times are so different that we don’t need to acknowledge our sins, confess, and repent. I would venture to say that this is precisely what needs to happen.**

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Lincoln went on to describe, in the proclamation, the awful calamity of the war that was destroying the country. Political divisions had wrought the unthinkable in our country ... civil war. Today, we witness serious divisions that undermine a sense of well being in our nation. We have become cynics and apathy about the course of the country. Instead of the broadest possible representation in our government, we seem bent on allowing a smaller and smaller group to decide the direction and will of the nation. I had one person recently share with me how close we seem to be approaching a sense of tyranny. Perhaps we may be coming close to divisions that may not be overcome at all.

I am struck by President Lincoln's words that we were a nation blessed by God, given peace and prosperity but who have forgotten God. Are we slipping into that same posture today? The pursuit of power, wealth, and control seems more important than being a nation that is filled with loving, caring people. Where is the nation that puts God first? I am not talking about simply putting prayer back in the school or letting religious symbols allowed in the public spaces. Where is the heart of the people that are concerned with loving one another as God has loved us?

We live in one of the richest nations in the world. We consume close to half the world's resources, but what of our own people? The US Census reports that as of 2003, 12.5 million people live in poverty in this country. That is nearly 40 million of our citizens! Our Christian Scriptures talk repeatedly about our need to care for the poor. We are failing too many people. The Center for American Progress reports that over 45 million people in this country are without medical insurance. Most of the world's religions talk about the responsibility its members have towards caring for the sick. The International Center for Prison Studies at King's College in London reports that the US has the largest documented prison population in the world, topping two million. That number is more than either China or Russia. What does that say about us as the people of God? What does that say about us as a country?

President Lincoln went on to state in his 1863 proclamation that we have become too self-sufficient to feel the need for redemption or grace. He said that we were too proud to pray. Lincoln asked the country to confess their national sins and to pray for forgiveness. I feel compelled to ask us to do the same today. If we are to be the loving people that God calls us to be, we would do well to fall on our knees, to confess our sins, ask for forgiveness and seek to change our ways. I worry that we are becoming too much like the religious leaders of Jesus' day. We are growing

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too concerned with rules and power and not enough concerned with putting God at the center of our lives.

We are called to be people who love God, love others and love ourselves. The fruit of our lives will be born out in the ways we live into that calling. Perhaps we need more of the spirit of the National Day of Prayer that President Lincoln called for in 1863. I rejoice that we are a nation that can celebrate freedom of religion. Many of my ancestors came to this country to escape religious persecution in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. But we are called to do more than just celebrate this day. We are called to approach God with “humiliation, fasting and prayer.” If we do so, I am convinced that God will show us the way to be a more loving and caring people.

William Sloane Coffin wrote this in his book “Credo”: “How do you love America? Don’t say, ‘My country right or wrong.’ That’s like saying, ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober.’ it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag, and don’t burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean. How do you love America? With the vision and compassion of Christ, with a transcendent ethic that alone can fulfill, ‘the patriot’s dream that sees beyond the years, her alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.’ (Katherine Bates). ‘Behold, I make all things news,’ said Jesus. Our revolutionary forebears seemed to understand that. They didn’t try to salvage the past. Their political debate pitted one kind of future against another kind of future. They knew people were supposed to die *to* an old order and now *with* the old order. How ironic that their descendants should today be crushed by ancient outmoded structures because we prefer to be victims rather than to be rebels! How ironic that the descendants of Thomas Jefferson should make like George III! How ironic that there’s hardly a youth in the land as radical and as reasonable as was Ben Franklin in his eighties!”

President Lincoln hoped his call for a national day of prayer and fasting would restore a divided and suffering country. He longed for peace and an end to the war that wracked havoc on our nation. He saw the way to be through confession of our sins, seeking God’s forgiveness, repentance on our part and then steps towards reconciling a country broken by war. I think we might do well to embrace this model today. God holds out the promise of great blessings to people who can be the loving people of faith. It is love, not war, not rules and regulations, not power or politics that will make a difference in our country. Only when we can remember God and remember who we are called to be will we be able to live into

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our divine calling. May we allow the love of God to rule in our lives and in our actions.

Let us pray. (Adapted from, A Prayer for the Country, Book of Common Prayer, page 820): “Almighty God, who has given us this good land for our heritage; We humbly ask of you that we may always prove ourselves a people mindful of your favor and glad to do your will. Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and pure manners. Save us from violence, discord and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend our liberties, and fashion us into one people, the multitudes brought out of many different people and languages. Endue with the spirit of Wisdom those to whom in your Name we entrust the authority of government, that there may be justice and peace at home. Through the obedience to your will, may we show forth your praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill out hearts with thankfulness. In the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in you to fail; all this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”