

Fifth Sunday after Trinity / Independence Day Sunday – July 5, 2026
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Block, Kansas
Rev. Joshua Woelmer

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18–25

“The Separation of Church and State”

Theme: God works in this world through church and state, for each have their duties to promote God’s peace in people’s lives.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It’s great to celebrate anniversaries of important events. Milestone anniversaries of marriages are especially important, and we ought to celebrate with those who mark their 50th or 60th anniversaries. Likewise, the Lutheran Church has been marking the 500th anniversaries of important points in the Reformation or Luther’s life. For example, last year on June 13 was the 500th anniversary of Martin and Katie Luther’s wedding. Next year will be the 500th anniversary of “A Mighty Fortress,” something we can look forward to. Other church celebrations go back even further: I also made a big deal last year about the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. This year there is a particularly important celebration for our nation, its 250th year since declaring independence from Britain and her king.

Depending on your comparison point, it is either a short or a long time ago. 250 years sounds like a long time, and it is—for nations. We have one of the oldest democratic governments, because many European governments have cycled through different forms since our Constitution was adopted in 1788. But our nation is also young, especially as compared to the history of the German, French, or English peoples—let alone the histories of the tribes of all nations around the world. Our nation’s sesquicentennial deserves to be celebrated, even by churches. After all, our nation is peculiar in how it regards religion. It neither seeks to govern our beliefs nor to hinder them, unless they are injurious to others.

Colloquially, we call this the separation of church and state. However, this separation is not what most people believe it is, nor did Thomas Jefferson invoke this “wall of separation” to keep the Church or its pastors from speaking on political issues that also touch on biblical morality. The separation refers to the separation of the institutions of church and state, that the church would not rule in this world through the state, nor that the state would rule the church, deciding who her ministers would be. And yet, God rules both realms because He rules everything. But He rules differently in church and state.

There are some key Bible passages that emphasize this. Jesus, for example, tells Pontius Pilate, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world”** (John 18:36). Jesus also prays to the Father this about his followers, **“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world”** (John 17:14). Neither Jesus nor we Christians see this world as all there is. We are “in the world, but not of the world.” We call this a paradox. We look forward to a better world to come, but we do not despise this world as completely lost or useless. No, God has placed us here for a purpose,

to live the life that He has given us, to share the Gospel with our family and friends, and to be a blessing to others.

God gives us the state, or government, in order to protect our earthly lives. We call this the “Left-Hand Kingdom of God,” because it is not the primary way by which he works. Nonetheless, God does rule all, and even though many rulers claim to have God on their side, it is God who works through imperfect men and women to accomplish His purposes. God uses the government to curb sin. If the human proclivity for sin would be unleashed, the resulting chaos and anarchy would tear apart human society and relationship.

God has a number of tools in his toolbox to curb sin. He uses the law to punish those who commit grave offenses. He uses social disapproval and our desire to look upstanding to encourage us to do what is right. He has placed his Law into everyone’s consciences, so they feel bad when they’ve made a mistake and want to undo its consequences. He uses moral teachings from mothers and wise elders to instill basic morality in societies around the world. He uses consequences for one’s own actions to teach us that we shouldn’t touch hot stoves more than once, metaphorically speaking, of course.

In all this, God is “hidden.” He does not manifest himself whenever we do something wrong. He uses police officers to catch criminals, firefighters and EMS to save us from dangers, and those in our military to protect us from threats from other nations. God uses presidents, congress, governors, legislatures, county commissioners, mayors, and the like to establish basic law and order. Of course, God does not like immoral laws and actions by our leaders, but we ought to be very careful when or if we need to rebel, because chaos and anarchy is worse than tyranny.

This is also why the Declaration of Independence is such a great document. It is carefully worded to show patience and restraint on behalf of the American colonies—they wanted neither tyranny nor anarchy. They strove to prove the numerous injuries inflicted upon them by the King of Great Britain which they had hitherto endured. They argued that they had attempted redress for these wrongs. They argued that it was their right to rule themselves in order to protect their God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This argument did not proceed directly from the Bible—it is not cited in the Declaration of Independence. But they did appeal to God’s indirect rule of people and nature. It is part of natural law that tyranny creates in us the desire to separate from a tyrant and rule ourselves—so that is what our Founders dared to do.

As we celebrate our nation’s 250th anniversary of declaring our independence, it is also important to recognize how God rules differently in the Church. God rules the world through primarily external coercion—external laws, outward consequences, and finger-wagging from family and friends for dubious behavior. But God rules the Church from the inside-out. He rules his spiritual kingdom by love. God’s love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). When we recognize God’s love for us, it allows us to love our neighbor. Let me ask you a question: which is more effective, to tell your child that they must weed the flowerbed of their elderly neighbor, or to see them already doing it because they want to? We would all say the latter. This applies to all of life, which is why St. Paul also says, “**love is the fulfilling of the law**” (Rom 13:10). Yes, you could get people to do what you want by forcing them through threats or legislation, but God works deeper in our hearts to help us do things because we want to.

The power behind this love is the message of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection. This makes no sense to the world: how can the message of a guy dying on a cross do anything? Wouldn’t

miracles change people's hearts faster? Wouldn't a great speech from a guru or psychologist do more? Unfortunately, no—they don't work. God doesn't work through these things, but in fact works against them. He declares the wisdom of this age to be foolishness: **"For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles"** (1 Cor 1:22–23).

Both the Jews and Gentiles of Paul's day were looking at this world to give them answers. We are tempted to do the same. Surely if we get the right president, or listen the right podcaster, or get rich quick, then all our problems will be solved. They won't. The only true solution to our problems is found in Christ being **"the power of God and the wisdom of God"** (24). It was in Christ's wisdom that he be crucified to take away all our sins. It was in Christ's power that looked like weakness to the world where He bound Satan from accusing us. It was in the weakness of His dead body in a tomb where Christ rose again to defeat death and promise us eternal life with Him.

Through His cross and resurrection, we see the evidence of God's love for us. 1 John 3:16, **"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us."** 1 John 4:19, **"We love because he first loved us."** This is true power: not exercised in the overthrow of an earthly king, but rather in showing love to all men by dying for their rebellion of sin. Jesus voluntarily submitted himself to evil men: to the Sanhedrin, to the crowds, and to Pontius Pilate. He understood that the kingdom He was creating would be far greater than any nation—including our own. Jesus's kingdom is found throughout the world, wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and received in people's hearts. Jesus's kingdom is when we are loved and show that love to others. Jesus's kingdom is not of this world, but it is certainly in this world.

We ought to give thanks to God that this distinction was understood by our Founding Fathers. There is a lot of debate as to whether our nation is, was, or never was a Christian nation. There are a lot of definitional questions that I have, like what it means to be a Christian nation. But there is no doubt in my mind that they understood the role of government as an instrument of God, they acknowledged the reality of original sin and pride in the human heart, and they chose to separate the institutions of Church and State. These are not found in non-Christian governments, which too often become a fight over who can be the "top dog" and boss everyone around. Too often non-Christian rulers deify themselves, becoming a rule unto themselves.

We ought to thank God that many of our Christian principles still pervade our nation. We ought to thank God for peace and security that our government provides, and pray that it will continue to protect our rights and do what God has given it to do, that we as Christians may proclaim Christ and Him crucified for the salvation of souls. Government works best when it protects our bodies from harm and punishes wrongdoing, but the Church works best when it proclaims the real power of God that is found in Jesus's dying and rising. May we always take that to heart, for it is more important to be Christian regardless of the nation we find ourselves in.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Introduction: It’s great to celebrate anniversaries of important events. Milestone anniversaries of marriages are especially important, and we ought to celebrate with those who mark their 50th or 60th anniversaries. Likewise, the Lutheran Church has been marking the 500th anniversaries of important points in the Reformation or Luther’s life. For example, last year on June 13 was the 500th anniversary of Martin and Katie Luther’s wedding. Next year will be the 500th anniversary of “A Mighty Fortress,” something we can look forward to. Other church celebrations go back even further: I also made a big deal last year about the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. This year there is a particularly important celebration for our nation, its 250th year since declaring independence from Britain and her king.

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I. The Separation of Church and State

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1. However, this separation is not what most people believe it is, nor did Thomas Jefferson invoke this “wall of separation” to keep the Church or its pastors from speaking on political issues that also touch on biblical morality.
2. The separation refers to the separation of the institutions of church and state, that the church would not rule in this world through the state, nor that the state would rule the church, deciding who her ministers would be.
3. And yet, God rules both realms because He rules everything.
4. But He rules differently in church and state.

B. There are some key Bible passages that emphasize this.

1. Jesus, for example, tells Pontius Pilate, “**My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I**

might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36).

2. Jesus also prays to the Father this about his followers, **“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:14).**

3. Neither Jesus nor we Christians see this world as all there is.

4. We are “in the world, but not of the world.” We call this a paradox.

5. We look forward to a better world to come, but we do not despise this world as completely lost or useless.

6. No, God has placed us here for a purpose, to live the life that He has given us, to share the Gospel with our family and friends, and to be a blessing to others.

II. The Left-Hand Kingdom of God: The State

A. God gives us the state, or government, in order to protect our earthly lives.

1. We call this the “Left-Hand Kingdom of God,” because it is not the primary way by which he works.

2. Nonetheless, God does rule all, and even though many rulers claim to have God on their side, it is God who works through imperfect men and women to accomplish His purposes.

3. God uses the government to curb sin.

4. If the human proclivity for sin would be unleashed, the resulting chaos and anarchy would tear apart human society and relationship.

B. God has a number of tools in his toolbox to curb sin.

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C. In all this, God is “hidden.”

1. He does not manifest himself whenever we do something wrong.

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III. The Right-Hand Kingdom of God: The Church

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3. He rules his spiritual kingdom by love.
4. God’s love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5).
5. When we recognize God’s love for us, it allows us to love our neighbor.
6. Let me ask you a question: which is more effective, to tell your child that they must weed the flowerbed of their elderly neighbor, or to see them already doing it because they want to?
7. We would all say the latter.
8. This applies to all of life, which is why St. Paul also says, “**love is the fulfilling of the law**” (Rom 13:10).
9. Yes, you could get people to do what you want by forcing them through threats or legislation, but God works deeper in our hearts to help us do things because we want to.

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1. This makes no sense to the world: how can the message of a guy dying on a cross do anything?
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Conclusion: We ought to give thanks to God that this distinction was understood by our Founding Fathers. There is a lot of debate as to whether our nation is, was, or never was a Christian nation. There are a lot of definitional questions that I have, like what it means to be a Christian nation. But there is no doubt in my mind that they understood the role of government as an instrument of God, they acknowledged the reality of original sin and pride in the human heart, and they chose to separate the institutions of Church and State. These are not found in non-Christian governments, which too often become a fight over who can be the "top dog" and boss everyone around. Too often non-Christian rulers deify themselves, becoming a rule unto themselves.

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Continue with the Nicene Creed.