

**Remarks by David H. Wilkins
First Presbyterian Patriotic Sunday
Greenville, SC
June 30, 2014**

Thanks Richard for that kind introduction.

It is always an honor whenever you are asked to speak – but especially so when that invitation comes from your cherished friends and church family.

I asked Susan what she thought I should say to y'all and she said, "David, if you can't make your speech memorable, at least make it short."

Sage advice indeed.

Now, Susan Wilkins will also tell you I'm all for celebrating special occasions.

I actually do remember her birthday and our wedding anniversary.

I love Christmas and even the countdown to a new year because each is a milestone – an annual reminder to stop and be actively grateful for a sacred birth...a cherished union...a precious year that turns into a priceless memory.

But I think it's easy to think July 4th isn't *that kind* of special.

After all, we're not flooded with news reports of families desperately trying to be home together in time for Independence Day.

Last minute shoppers *aren't* flocking to the malls on July 3rd because they've put off purchasing that perfect patriotic gift!

But you know, Fourth of July really is *that* special.

It's a birthday celebration for sure – but even more so – July 4th is a *blessings* celebration.

And like it is with most everything else in life, sometimes you don't really understand how much you've been blessed, how much you love and appreciate what you have – until you're missing it.

I think Susan and I really experienced that for the first time about this great country of ours in the summer of 2005 when we packed up and left behind everyone and everything we loved for our four year adventure in Canada.

We expected to learn so much while we were away about our northern neighbor – and of course we did – but we also received an unexpected gift: And that was keener insight into understanding just what the United States has meant – and continues to mean – to the rest of the world.

We learned, for example, about the US servicemen sent to Canada to fortify North American safety by helping to build the strategic Alaska Highway during the long, dark days of World War II.

In a tiny town tucked away in the mountains of British Columbia, 12 young American Army GIs died in a freak horrific accident on May 14, 1942 at a place called Charlie Lake, Fort St. John.

It would have been easy for time to wash away the memories – but the residents of Fort St. John never allowed that to happen – passing down the story of the lost American servicemen from one decade to the next.

66 years later, Fort St. John had raised the finances and fulfilled its decades-old dream of erecting a monument on the lake dedicated to the 12 US soldiers they had never forgotten.

They tracked down their families and Susan and I had the privilege of spending time with the relatives of these servicemen.

They were so profoundly grateful for this monument because it validated the real contributions of their loved ones – not lost on the battlefield, but devoted to the cause just the same.

They did their duty – exactly what their country asked them to do.

They answered freedom's call.

They contributed to the greatness of our two democracies at a time when tyranny was on the march.

And they died so very, very young.

Some were just weeks into new marriages or left newborns behind when they headed up north.

Ronald Reagan once said: "We see these soldiers in our mind as old and wise. But most of them were boys when they died, and they gave up two lives...the one they were living and the one they would have lived. They gave up everything for our country, for us. And all we can do is remember."

That's why when I was serving in Canada, I took every opportunity to visit Canadian Forces Bases around the country to meet and greet the young brave servicemen and women who were either just returning from fighting the war on terror in Afghanistan or were preparing to ship out.

I wanted them to hear personally from me – on behalf of the United States of America – how grateful we were for their distinguished service and sacrifice.

I wanted them to know that all they put in – and all they gave up – did not go unrecognized or unappreciated.

I wanted them to know that the United States is a country that remembers to be grateful.

And then, at Christmastime in 2007, I had the opportunity to go to Kandahar myself to visit with Canadian and US troops stationed there.

I recall it felt like landing on the moon – it was so dusty and the conditions so stark.

Those troops had little to celebrate that Christmas – half a world away from those they loved – on guard for Taliban attacks – when I stopped by their outposts to thank them.

And yet they had everything.

And the most amazing thing was – to a man – every single one of them *thanked me* for *my* service – for giving up *my* Christmas.

It was a lesson in humility I will never forget.

Those young troops were wise beyond their years: content in a way I'd not seen people blessed with every luxury, confident in their mission and the importance of their work.

That Christmas I met warriors with servants' hearts.

It struck me then that the best and bravest amongst us have always had hearts dedicated to service.

And America is different – special – set apart – because our bedrock – our very foundation – is built upon the labor and love of men and women who willingly gave everything they had in service not to themselves – but to the next generation.

John Quincy Adams said it this way: "Posterity: You will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you will make good use of it."

Almost 200 years later, here's how a young Marine from Gilbert, South Carolina did his part.

Some of you have probably heard his story.

Three years ago, Lance Corporal Kyle Carpenter was setting up a forward patrol base in Afghanistan when it came under attack by Taliban fighters.

When the grenade came over the compound roof, Carpenter jumped on it to save the life of his friend and fellow Marine.

Carpenter sustained devastating injuries to his face and body in that act of valor, nearly dying three times in the next 24 hours as medics raced to save his life.

After more than 40 surgeries, two years in the hospital, and countless hours of physical therapy, Carpenter is thriving.

Those who know him say he is infused with sunny optimism, humility and faith.

He is now a freshman at the University of South Carolina and earlier this month, the retired Marine Corporal was at the White House where he received our nation's highest military award – the Medal of Honor.

Interestingly, he also has a tattoo on his side – and had it before he went into battle.

It is the words of Psalm 144: "Blessed be the Lord my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle."

Kyle Carpenter is the reason July Fourth is a blessings celebration – because throughout our nation's young -- but rich – history, somehow all along the way God has given us Kyle Carpenters – men and women who asked the Lord to be their rock and light their way and give them the strength and courage to face the enemies of freedom.

And that's why I believe the United States remains the best and brightest beacon of hope this side of heaven.

The world needs our leadership.

Susan and I saw firsthand in Canada in meeting representatives from numerous countries that while publicly they may complain about US dominance, behind the scenes, most of the world wants American ideals, ingenuity and compassion setting the global bar.

It is America that has always led the global fight to end devastating diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

We are the most charitable nation on earth – no other country comes close to matching our giving.

The US is the nation that develops and disseminates science and technology that it shares with the rest of the world.

And where there are natural calamities – it is always US relief aid and volunteers first on the scene.

America has never hoarded what God has given us.

We have shared His gifts.

That's not too shabby a record for a country that's a mere 238 years old!

And all of it is why July Fourth is a blessings celebration.

God has truly shed His grace on this great land and used the extraordinary sacrifices of ordinary Americans to achieve great ends.

May it ever be so.

After the American Revolution in a letter to the people of South Carolina in 1790 George Washington wrote: "The value of liberty was thus enhanced in our estimation by the difficulty of its attainment..."

As the saying goes, "freedom is not free."

And that's what makes it so very precious.

So this July 4th, as we celebrate America's birthday, let it be with profound gratitude for America's patriots past and present who love our country more than life and for our great good God – the author of liberty.

In a world that seems to value freedom less and less may liberty's light here grow stronger and brighter and may God continue to bless America on this Independence Day – a very special holiday indeed.

Thank you.

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