

“America the Beautiful”

A sermon preached at Foley UMC by Dr. Lance Moore, on July 4th, 2010

Deuteronomy 26:7-13:

“Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.” Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. Then say to the LORD your God: “I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them.”

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The United States of America is 234 years old today. That’s a long time for a nation to remain free and democratic. However, when you look at our history in the context of world history America is still a young nation. Consider this: when Thomas Jefferson died, Abraham Lincoln was a young man of 17. When Lincoln was assassinated, still a young man, Woodrow Wilson was a boy of 8. By the time Wilson died, Ronald Reagan was a boy of 12.

There you have it. The lives of just four Presidents can take you all the way back to the beginning of our country. The span of 232

years is actually less than twice the maximum human life span... two people could have, in a sense, experienced our entire national history. We are so young. And yet we stand tall and unique among the nations because of the principles on which we were established: **that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and chief among these are life, liberty, and the opportunity to pursue happiness.** The vast majority of nations or empires before us guaranteed a life of toil, servitude and oppression.

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the other principles of freedom and justice which America embodies, should be celebrated. Those principles are worth dying for... and many have. Of the original 56 signers, Ben Franklin was the eldest. Eighteen were under 40; three were in their 20s. Almost half were judges and lawyers. Eleven were merchants, nine were land-owners and farmers, and the remaining twelve were doctors, ministers, and politicians. After signing the Declaration, Ben Franklin wryly remarked, "we must all hang together, otherwise we shall most assuredly hang separately." Benjamin Harrison of Virginia, who was quite obese, teased skinny Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts: "With me it will all be over in a minute, but you, you will be dancing on air an hour after I am gone." Of those 56 who signed, all were at one time or another the victims of manhunts and driven from their homes. Five were imprisoned. Several lost wives and children. Twelve signers had their homes completely burned. Seventeen lost everything they owned. Nine were killed during the war. They were willing to die because they had an optimist vision of an ideal nation.

Yet, today we have a great wave of pessimism and cynicism sweeping our land. I refuse to surrender to that. Let us hold high the virtuous principles of liberty and justice, even while we are

willing to admit our country is not perfect and has room for improvement.

To paraphrase Johnny Carson, “I'm so fortunate not to live in a country like Russia, completely controlled by a single political party. The Communist Party rigs elections, robs the people of their money and their freedom, all to keep their bloated, corrupt inefficient bureaucracy in power. Thank goodness, in the U.S., we have TWO parties that do the same for us!”

Jokes about government have been around a long time, but over the last twenty years, our cynicism about politics has grown to the point where it's not even funny anymore.

Nevertheless, there is still much that is great about our democratic system and our country as a whole, and I'd like to celebrate that today... even if I reserve the remaining 364 days of a year to complain! One problem is that we forget the wisdom of our founding fathers and mothers, we forget the principles that created this great nation, and without giving you a history lesson, let's go back and review some of those principles.

First, let us thank God for Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Speech. The Pilgrims came here to resist government-imposed religion. History is clear: whenever government gets entangled in religion, bad things tend to happen. Consider even the Old Testament: the people begged for a theocracy, a God-appointed king. So God sent Samuel to anoint Saul as king. At first he ruled with kindness and benevolence, but soon power corrupted Saul and he became evil. Most of the “God-appointed” kings of Israel turned out to be terrible despots. Even David and Solomon were corrupted. This pattern is repeated throughout history. In the time of Jesus, Rome had conquered Jerusalem but they still left the Jewish priests in charge of local governance so they had a

“religious government,” a theocracy... and what did that “religious government” do? They arrested Jesus and assured his execution. A thousand years later, the Christian church established a ruling theocracy. In the Middle Ages and pre-Enlightenment period, the Roman Catholic Church rose to almost unlimited power throughout Europe, and the result of that “Christian government” was the murderous Inquisition. Christians were tortured, imprisoned or burned at the stake simply because they did not agree with every teaching and practice of the church hierarchy. Do you see why it was so important to the Pilgrims to escape a theocracy, to escape any system where the government tries to dictate religious belief? Even today, we have a state-sponsored church in parts of Europe, and Christianity is almost extinct in those very places. That is why the most important principle of our U.S. Constitution is Freedom of Religion. Some politicians want to use government to force a particular brand of Christianity down our throats, and others want to outlaw the Muslim religion. Would Jesus want us doing that? Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself, and in the Golden Rule, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. So how can a true Christian be opposed to freedom of religion? If you lived in a country with a majority-Muslim population, would you want them to outlaw Christianity? Would you want a Muslim public school teacher telling your child how to pray? No. And so, based on the Golden Rule, you cannot flip the tables and legislate *our* view of religion onto others. Even God does not force religion upon people against their will, so why would *we* want to do so? Freedom of religion was offered way back in the Old Testament, with Joshua, who said to the people, “Choose this day which god you want to follow....” He was their leader, he could have said, “Follow Yahweh or die,” but he gave each of them the *choice* of which god to serve.

The founders of our great nation avoided this trap. Some of them

were Protestant Christians, some were Catholic Christians. A few were Jews. A few were atheists. And many of the key thinkers were liberal deists, like Thomas Jefferson, who took scissors and cut all the miracles out of the New Testament and threw them away! There was no way that the founding fathers, with such widely differing beliefs, could agree on a “state religion.” So they did the wise thing, they embraced the very reason that the Pilgrims fled to America in the first place: they made it clear that as a *people*, we would depend upon God, but as a *government*, we would never tell people what to believe, or where and when and how to pray or worship. Our founders showed great genius in spelling this out clearly in the Bill of Rights. On September 25, 1789, the First Congress of the United States proposed a dozen amendments—improvements—to the Constitution. Ten of those amendments were ratified and became known as the Bill of Rights, and Amendment I reads in part: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech....”

That does not mean that government would *disrespect* religion, but that law should remain neutral about faith, showing no favoritism of one brand of religion over another. Friends, I understand your frustration that so much of our society has become secularized and even immoral. But you are wasting your energy to try fixing that by passing laws. You fix that by telling people about Jesus Christ and his love. Politics is not the answer, and politics has never *been* the answer in three thousand years of civilized history. Theocracy—a religious government—has never worked. Oh, how I wish people would put their emotional frustration into evangelism rather into a misguided effort to legislate religion.

When we celebrate freedom and liberty, we also rejoice that the founders, from the start, established this country as a light of

liberty, proclaiming the principle of general equality and liberty in the Declaration of Independence. Sadly, that did not initially include women and minorities. It would be almost 200 years later before full rights were granted to women and people of color via the Bill of Rights and the Civil Rights Act. But the ideals for equal rights were already planted like seeds in the founding documents. Drafted by Thomas Jefferson in June of 1776, the Declaration of Independence is a cherished symbol of liberty, filled with exalted and unforgettable convictions of the founders, including: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed....” In those two sentences are several profound principles:

1. That we are not mere animals, we are spiritual beings formed by a Creator God for a purpose.
2. That as such, we have a right to life and liberty and a fair shot at finding happiness.
3. Government is needed to protect and ensure those rights.
4. Legitimate, ethical government must have the consent of its people... leaders must be democratically elected, not rulers by force or by noble birth. This principle mirrored the American entrepreneurial attitude: that anyone can attain success, even riches, by working hard, and that noble birth is irrelevant. America was seen as a land of opportunity and promise.

In Deuteronomy, we are given a picture of a rich, Promised Land. The United States has come as close as any in history at matching that picture. We partly measure the success and quality of our nation by material prosperity. That is not all bad, because the Bible is full of examples where ample food and shelter, an affluent quality of life, is considered good and virtuous.

But if you read Scripture closely, the true measure of life-quality is found in two things: one, the spiritual dimension—how devoted the people are to worshipping God over idols, and two, the quality of life for widows and orphans, for the infirmed and the poor. No one wants a communistic welfare state. But God smiles upon our efforts to retain a social safety net. Jesus repeatedly encouraged us to have compassion for the poor and the outcast, to remember “the least of these,” who are just as important to God as the upper classes. We have seen, in the last twenty years, through both Republican and Democratic leadership, far more “welfare” doled out to the rich than to the poor. Most of you are, like me, of limited financial means... middle class. How many of you, like me, lost money in either stocks or pensions connected with the bankruptcy of General Motors or the shady deals of the Wall Street banks and investment houses? And yet, the very persons responsible for those failures have not lost a penny but instead have taken fat salaries and million dollar bonuses, in part paid for with our tax dollars. It is a reverse Robin Hood arrangement, and George Bush and Barack Obama have *both* been guilty of making that happen. Something is terribly wrong with that formula. It angers God. There are a hundred Scriptures which either chastise the rich, or call for generosity toward the poor. Jesus said, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.... Give to everyone who asks of you.”

Now, what is still wonderful about America is that I can preach these truths from the pulpit with impunity. That is a blessing. In many, many countries around the globe, religious and political speech has been constrained, outlawed, punished. Recently in Russia, several members of the press who dared question the government were arrested or tortured or killed. In many Muslim countries, preaching the Christian gospel can get you arrested or executed. We need to be deeply grateful for the men and women who have given their lives to protect our liberty.

But the final word is this: as great as the American experiment has been, we must not expect it to be utopia, and there is no political party or politician who will solve all our problems or save us. I trust God, not politicians. A little girl was being read to by her mother at bedtime. When the fairy tale book was closed, the little girl asked, "Mommy, do all fairy tales begin with, "Once upon a time?" "No," replied the mother. "Most of them begin with 'If I'm elected....' "

Jesus made promises, but not like that. 2,000 years ago, Jesus did promise us a better world or kingdom to live in. He said he had come to bring in the kingdom of God. Jesus announced that the kingdom of God is at hand, and that he is God's agent to bring in his kingdom, the new and better life. And most of the things that he described about that perfect kingdom are at least reflected partially in America at its best: inclusion and fairness for everyone, freedom, opportunity, potential for abundant life. And the United States, while far from perfect, is one of the most religious nations on earth, the most generous nation on earth, and probably THE most diverse in its religions, which is a product of our liberty. I believe our prosperity is also a fruit of that liberty.

We are right to celebrate Independence. We are right to be grateful that we had the sheer good fortune to have been born in the greatest country in the world, a land flowing with milk and honey and resources and opportunity beyond imagination, in a land that is indeed America the Beautiful. Thank you, patriots, and thank you God.

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