



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

The Spirituality of America The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost 742021

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

As some of you know, I put out a short video message about Independence Day earlier this week in which I held up a portion of a uniform that I was honored to wear when I was a member of the Junior Olympic team in 1982. And we traveled to Italy to participate in the World Championships. I was the youngest member of that team at 16. Representing my country was one of the greatest privileges of my life. I'll never forget that service and I'll never forget the opening ceremonies in which the organizers of the world championships had our team come in right alongside the Soviet Union. And it was so clear in those days that we were in a kind of life and death struggle for our way of life.

And I know that my small contribution is very small in comparison to anyone who has put on a uniform or placed themselves in harm's way to defend the people of the United States. But nonetheless, it was a proud moment for me. I cannot think about the 4th of July without thinking about that moment in my life.

And certainly this holiday is an opportunity for us to give thanks for this great nation, but I want to suggest that we need more today than to simply acknowledge our nation or to celebrate the love we have for this country. Because one of the things that I saw firsthand, and one of the things that all of us will see in just a few weeks when the Tokyo Olympics start, the love of nation is something that is kind of natural and ubiquitous. A lot of people have it. A lot of people love their country. Anybody who stands on the medal podium in the coming Olympics are going to get a little teary-eyed and they're going to be incredibly proud of the nation they represent.

Today, I want to lift up for you something that I believe is truly crucial. That's truly unique about us as a country, truly unique about us as Americans. And this is that we have developed here a kind of spirituality, a kind of way of seeing ourselves in others, and who we are in light of God and in relationship to God. That spirituality is unique and that spirituality is right now, something we need to claim and lift up and protect a little bit in the same way as if you would protect a candle that was lit from any wind around it, by keeping it close to you and cupping your hands around it.

And that spirituality is something that lies at a deeper level than any politics or any kind of policy that we could speak about in connection to it. It's something that is distinctively our own, and it was embedded in this country in the earliest strata of writings and documents and texts that we developed and lived out in our history.

So I want to give you two examples of this to paint this spirituality for you so that you can see it hopefully closely today and clearly today. And the first is from a sermon that was delivered in 1630 on the decks of the *Arabella*, which was a ship that was bringing the new governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, to America. And on the decks of the *Arabella*, before everybody who was there, Winthrop gave a sermon, which has since been quoted again and again and again by politicians. And it was called the Model of Christian Charity. In it, Winthrop told his listeners that they must consider themselves, that they are a city on a hill and the eyes of all people are upon us. We are a city on a hill and the eyes of all people are upon us.

Ronald Reagan, when he ran for president in the late seventies, used this image when he described America. And he used it rightly because that image of our nation as a city upon a hill is something that we have claimed for generations. But the reason why Winthrop placed our country in that way as a light to shine, as a kind of point on the horizon that people would move toward for safety and protection was not because we had some kind of inherent qualities that made us better than anybody else. It was because, Winthrop told his congregation, that they were going to be a people for whom God was going to be centered. And this is what he wrote.

He said now the only way to avoid shipwreck - and keep in mind they were on a ship at the time, and that was a real threat. Now, the only way to avoid shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah, the prophet, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.

So when Winthrop spoke about this city on the hill, he spoke about it in terms of a kind of moral aspiration that wanted to follow the will of God in a powerful way. And that meant going with the grain of the prophets and loving mercy and loving justice and walking humbly. That spirituality that generated from those words was one in which there would be a kind of common acceptance of the fact that we all falter and we all fall short of this aspiration to live according to God. And that we all have a kind of moment in our lives in which there is a return or a rebirth or a regeneration, as they called it, where God's spirit comes alive in us.

And finally, there was a moment in which we reached out and saw ourselves part of a larger web of relationality, part of a larger community. Those three elements, the sense of ourselves as sinners, the sense of ourselves as being transformed by God's grace. And the sense of ourselves as being part of a

whole, that came to represent for Winthrop, the heart and soul of the spirituality that would make this project called New England, that would make it somehow able to stand on its own feet and to walk into the future.

This was an aspiration. Winthrop knew as a governor, more than anybody else, how far short people fell from living according to those aspirations, but it was that vision of America that gave us what we were and what we are. It was that vision of the country that stands behind everything we can claim about our country. It was transposed through the language of human rights. And Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence said that the creator has designed us in such a way that we had a natural right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And this is just a transposition of that spirituality into the language of rights.

And every social movement that has come after this sermon, every social movement that has been successful, whether it's a civil rights movement or the environmental movement, all of them have tried to tap into that American spirituality in which there was an acknowledgement of limitation, a movement towards regeneration or renewal, and an incorporation into a larger body. Every therapeutic movement, particularly the 12 step movement has at its core that spirituality. And that spirituality is distinctively American. And that tells us an important message about what our work is to be as Christians here and now. For Winthrop realized that his first step in trying to found the colony of Massachusetts was to first found a church. Before there was a nation, there was a church and that church was to somehow be salt and light to the nation that grew around it.

So on the 4th of July, it's important for us to give thanks for that spirituality. Because that is the work that God is asking us to do on this day. Not merely to lift up the love of our country, as important as that is, but to tap into that spirituality because it is from that, that we have done great and good things. And yes, we all fall short of its aspirational call. We all fall short of its ideals, but there is inside of it, a promise of renewal and a promise of relationship with one another that is incredibly powerful. And it's a reminder to us that the greatest days of this country are not in the past, but in the future, because God is still at work in us and through us with that spirituality today.

And over the generations, what has become clear is that spirituality has been such that it has a kind of generosity about it. It can accommodate different faiths and different denominations and different views of who God is by name, but a kind of concurrence and a kind of going with the grain and a kind of participation in the spiritual community that gets built by it.

And this brings me to the second image I want to raise up for you today. And it's from a poem. And then an image that developed at the close of the 19th

century. As America was maturing as a nation, we received a gift from the nation of France, the Statue of Liberty. I have a prototype of it printed on the bulletin on the front, and this was meant to be a kind of new image of what it meant to rally around a figure.

A wonderful poet named Emma Lazarus, she was the daughter of Polish, Jewish immigrants, and she was helping the effort to raise money to bring this statue to New York City. And she actually wrote a poem – after she saw this image, she wrote a poem called *New Colossus*, by which she meant that the old world, Europe, had a Colossus in the city of Rhodes, which had been developed and raised to celebrate the power of Helios, the sun God, and that god's ability to protect the city of Rhodes from invasion.

But the statue of Liberty, Lazarus wrote, this would be a new Colossus, a new way of being in the world. This nation would not be known for masculine qualities of fighting, but for feminine qualities and motherly qualities of welcoming. And she would be known, Lazarus wrote, as the Mother of Exiles. And this is what she wrote in her poem, words that became famous when they were printed on it.

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

Now, again, politicians have made much of these words and they've used it to speak about the importance of immigration, which I personally support strongly, but there is a deeper message in this poem because Lazarus is not simply raising up the social benefit of having entrepreneurs and people with a little bit of gumption come to this country to make themselves and their lives better. But Lazarus was appealing to that American spirituality, even though she didn't share the faith of Christianity, she was leaning into that spirituality because by speaking about the welcome to those who were oppressed, to those who were tempest-tost, to those who were tired, to those who were homeless, she was lifting up that deep connection that Winthrop was lifting up to his congregation. And she was inviting the people who would come to this country and the people who were in this country to think of themselves in relation to that aspiration.

So on this day, 4th of July, we'd like to speak about the love of our country, which is appropriate, but it's also important for us to think about the spirituality of America, the spirituality is everything. It's something that is a bit imperiled now, but because it is imperiled, that does not mean we should shirk back from lifting it up and leaning in and trusting God and moving into the future that God has given us.

And what's more important than any story we can tell about America, is to recognize this spirituality as alive and true, because one of the things that I've learned particularly over the past couple of years is that there are many American stories, not just one, but the capacity to hear those stories and to respond to them and to make room for them in our lives and to weave them together, that requires a kind of spirituality.

So the question I have today is what is your American story? And the second question I have today is what is the spirituality of America that lives in you? And to help you along with that, I've placed a little bit of my own story in front of you today. On the back of the bulletin, there's a picture of my grandfather and grandmother, Theodore and Emma Zoely (sp?) that was taken in the early 1930s. This is before my mother was born in 1934 and after they had finally found their way to a bit of prosperity in construction, which was their chosen field.

And in this picture, you have my grandfather who immigrated here in 1906 when he was eight years old. And the first, of course, landmark that he saw that was recognizable to him was the Statue of Liberty. And he came in on Ellis Island and he found his way to a career. He began as a mechanic, And then as a mechanic, he began to deliver gravel for construction sites. And then finally he started his own business. And finally, that business, took root.

And this is a picture in which they had achieved the American dream. He's standing there holding a hat, which is a symbol of his authority as a business owner. He's got layers of clothing on, which is of course, a code for anybody who has been poor, that he had more than enough clothing. He is flanked by not only his wife, Emma, who is in the back, but his sister-in-law Rita, who is my Aunt Rita and his brother, his baby brother, who I knew as Uncle Jean. But he was proudly an American citizen by birth. And his name was Amerigo. And sitting on the stone is my Aunt Corky (sp?) and she's holding a stuffed rabbit. And that's meant to convey to the viewer that she is receiving everything she needs to grow.

This is a small snapshot of an American dream come true. And I don't think my grandfather could have ever imagined that I would take everything I learned from him into the work that I do now, but I do. Particularly over the past year, as we've been involved in this construction project, I've been thinking about every lesson my grandfather taught me as we built walls together and as we laid tar together. And that has prepared me in ways that I could never imagine to be part of this construction project.

And I also have been thinking a lot about his ability to be incredibly, even keeled in the midst of challenges and crises, which always inevitably happen anytime you endeavor to do a project such as ours. I have been feeling his presence

inside me. And I know that he probably would never have imagined sitting for that photo that his life and his legacy would take the turn it did.

And that's just an indication of the way in which these small stories are not enough that the spirit inside of these actions, these are what matter. And what's more, when I look at my past of which I am incredibly proud, I feel through the spirituality that I have learned as an American, that my job is to work as hard as I can to make sure that we are a society in which the American dream becomes a reality for everybody. Where everybody has a sense to thrive, where everybody has a sense to dream, where everybody has a sense to live, where everybody has a sense and an opportunity to love. And that's something that lies at the core of what it means to be an American.

At the end of Winthrop's sermon, he writes the following. He draws from the Book of Deuteronomy and the Gospel of John. And he says to that small congregation on that ship, "Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, and that we are now commanded this day to love the Lord, our God, and to love one another."

We are in a similar turning point as a nation, and I believe the same could be said to us. We have a decision before us, whether or not we will love God and love one another and carry on traditions of this country and whether or not we will continue to let the spirituality of this country lead us forward into the future and live by the aspirations that it has given us.

We have a decision to make. Again, as it did at the beginning, it comes to us as the church, the question is, will we be the church again? And the same way when we step into the work that God gave our forebears to do, and will we find our way to the future? Let this church be the body that is salt and light to the country around it that we so love. And may God bless this country, America.