

“A Patriot’s Dream”

Matthew 23: 37-39

First Presbyterian Church Southampton, NY - Rev. Chuck Cary

July 02, 2017

God has given us the ultimate task of making peace. Anything less is irreligious and unpatriotic.

I was in Tennessee two years ago to celebrate 40 years of ministry at my home church. I noticed that the flag is down on the campus of the High School I attended. It is nowhere to be seen. I am not talking about the American flag, the Stars and Stripes, a Betsy Ross creation. The flag I refer to at dear ole Maryville High is the Confederate Battle flag – the erstwhile symbol of the school’s sport teams, whose mascot was Johnny Rebel. The Red Rebels we were called.

Sunday afternoon I had an energized discussion with a former roommate from college in which I supported the decision and declared I would be just as loyal to my alma mater if they changed the mascot to “patriot”, or “pioneer” or “volunteer” if some other school isn’t using those mascots already.

Red Rebels is a misnomer for a simple reason. During the Civil War many northern sympathizers lived in East Tennessee. The founding pastor of New Providence Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Isaac Anderson was an ardent, vocal abolitionist. His original influence over the church, the community, and the college he established is well-documented. My former roommate and I disagreed – the High School is still known as the “Rebels”. Some compromises have taken place.

Jesus was/is not a partisan political zealot as far as I can tell. He did let it be know what He dreamed of. In today’s scene our Lord looks over Jerusalem and with a sigh, a feeling of discontent, perhaps sadness, He laments: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it...how often have I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood...

The tone is anything but proud or triumphant. It resembles a dream unfulfilled or a hope that has never been realized “How often have I desired:” The last sentence is rhetorical in nature. Its answer is unanswerable.

The Savior of the world is disappointed in a city whose citizens clash, or who fail to show mercy. The Savior of the world regrets the fact that the Holy city does not know how to welcome the prophets sent to it...rejecting their dreams of a more compassionate world.

Jesus’ words are thought-provoking on this our 241st national birthday with the shooting of a U.S. Representative on our minds another in a hospital in the Bronx.

How do we take stock? What might God be saying to us amidst the fireworks – brass bands and ice cream this 4th of July? Is there a word from the Lord for today?

I love these United States because of the creed we espouse as citizens. We declare over and over again that all are created equal. This equality is engrained in our Declaration of Independence “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.” The preamble to our Constitution – begins with words you may have been asked to memorize: “We the people...in order to form a more perfect union.” In our pledge of allegiance – “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” I love America because of this equality, and unity of all which underpin our governance. I love America because equality is not an optional value, but a core necessity. At our best we have exported this understanding to the betterment of the world beyond. I still dream of the day.

But, there are times when I lament. I lament the inequalities which scandalize this creed. I lament the inequalities which divide us by race, class, gender or ethnic origin. I cringe whenever I see people excluded because of religion, gender, or sexual orientation. My duty as a citizen calls on me to name violations of our national creed which dehumanize others because of their differences, rather than honor them for what makes us one.

I love America because of the right to vote. To vote and run for office are blessings we often take for granted. I’ll never forget the first open election held in South Africa in the early nineties. Long, endless lines of citizens – waiting for hours in the hot sun – all for the privilege of casting a vote. Something close to 90% of eligible voters voted. I love America and still believe in the capacity to change it for the better by electing leaders who have the ear of the people. I love America because when you can’t make it to the polling place, we find ways to bring the polling place to you. In Naples, Florida I once counseled a nursing home resident to make some noise because her unit did not get a full briefing on how they could cast a vote. It is so simple and yet so integral to our form of government. The ballot box; the ballot computer.

But, it has become a bad dream – the fact that voter turnout is so low. I lament apathy that keeps people from feeling that their vote matters. I remember a school board election many years ago in Eastport – before it became the Eastport-South Manor district. The margin of the budget defeat was two. I lament any obstacle that keeps people from voting and voting with an informed conscience. (In fact – I believe that convicted felons should be required to vote as a term of their citizenship. In this day I doubt that anyone feels “punished” due to voting restrictions)

I love America because of our Constitution’s First Amendment. It guarantees the freedom of religion, freedom of speech, a free press, the right of assembly, and, the right of petition. I love our nation’s toleration of the right to dissent, to be heard. There is something beautiful about a government which so honors the freedoms of individuals. I love this country because of its emphasis on debate - and intolerance of tyranny and despotism. I love America because our laws, when properly respected and enforced, err on the side of possibility, not intransigence.

It is a bad dream –on the other hand – whenever we abuse our freedoms, distorting them in favor of the cheap, the easy. I lament when the Bill of Rights becomes carelessly, thoughtlessly, a crutch for anyone who wishes to avoid responsibility. I lament how the freedoms we cherish every July 4th are tarnished in the pursuits of selfishness or greed. I lament how quick we are to discuss freedoms, and how slow we have become when discussing freedom’s twin, our obligation. I lament when we manipulate the First Amendment, or pretend that Jesus wasn’t speaking to us: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.” His lament echoes across twenty centuries to rouse us from apathy, and quicken our conscience. Let us turn His lament into a dream fulfilled. I dream of the day when we can debate matters without resorting to personal attack.

And I dream of the day my own silence and cowardice no longer prevail in face of such distortion of our freedoms. I lament whenever evil has prospered because good people have felt powerless to say “Enough!” I love America. I lament when it is assaulted from within by forces which ignore God’s commandments! I love this country because of its B.B. King, its National Parks System. I love this country’s for its diverse music, its arts. I am proud to be an American whenever I walk into the Metropolitan Museum of Art; or see the Dallas Black Dance Troupe perform at the Alvin Ailey Theater. I love America because of its diversity – not because of its conformity. I love America because of its sense of humor, producing comedians unafraid to question or laugh. I love this country because of baseball and basketball. I love America because of its scientific break- through, and medical cures discovered. I love America because it has helped heal the afflicted. I love America because of what Emma Lazarus wrote – the lines at the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free!”

But, I lament parts of our history – which distort our values. I lament our inability to truly stifle and eliminate the disrespect/disharmony which still afflict us. I lament our part in the destruction of the environment. I lament with a patriotic but also religiously sanctioned lament – our refusal to obey the 10 commandments of the Lord.

I am drawn, this 4th of July – to that which comes close to being America’s contribution to sacred texts – Abraham Lincoln’s 2nd Inaugural address which he delivered March 4, 1865 – a mere 703 words. In it he mentions God 14 times; quotes scripture 4 times; invokes our prayers 3 times; Most Americans expected him to utter a vindictive screed against the Confederacy. They would be disappointed. Fredric Douglas was there. Ironically, John Wilkes Booth was there. The man who, days later, on Good Friday, would take a gun and the law in his own hands and assassinate the one who could reconcile us. Nevertheless I love this country for doing what Winston Churchill says we are always prone to do – the right thing even though it takes a while: Here’s what Lincoln said: “With malice toward none. With charity for all. With firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right. Let us strive on to finish this work we are in – to bind up this nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne this battle: his widow/his orphan; to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace; among ourselves among all nations!”

With these words President Lincoln honored Jesus Christ who longed to reconcile Jerusalem. And he honors us with their call to duty. I am grateful when words help us rise, and forever serve the living God!