

Mending America's Flaws

II Kings 5:1-14, Luke 10:1-10, 16-21

Since the fourth of July dressed up and came to church today, that's reason enough for us to apply a theological critique to our country. In preparation of this sermon, Julian Hartt's *A Christian Critique of American Culture*, Stanley Hauerwas' *Peaceable Kingdom*, John Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, and William McClendon's *Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness* played defining roles. Katharine Bates' patriotic hymn, "America, the Beautiful," contains an artful tension – **praise** for America and **prayer** for America. Our country, as theologian Rodney Clapp reminds us, is noble and brave but awash in contradictions: our slave-owning founders declared independence; we are founded on unrestrained capitalism but strive to be a democracy; we are a powerful secular nation but we are the most religious nation in the developed world; we are the greatest empire of the day, but maintain an exceptional sense of innocence. Two stories: The Fourth of July signals the beginning of war and violence; the biblical story insists that only the resurrection of Jesus has saving value.

Someone once said there are three kinds of patriots, two bad and one good. Bad patriots are **the uncritical lovers, the ones who never see a flaw in America and the loveless critics, who never met a country they didn't like better than America**. The good patriot carries on a lover's quarrel with the country. Let's try that.

Let's use our Fourth of July to pray for America as Katherine Bates prayed: "God shed his grace on thee and crown thy good with brotherhood!**God mend thine every flaw**. Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law! May God thy gold refine Till all success be **nobleness** And **every gain divine!** Till **selfish gain no longer stain** the banner of the free! (Or the Gulf of Mexico) Till nobler men keep once again Thy whiter **jubilee!**

We are part of the American story, with all its glory and flaws, and it has blessed our families and our lives. Those of us not born to riches and nobility have been given opportunities unparalleled in any other country of the world. God bless America. Like Johnny Cash, "I've been everywhere man. And everywhere I've found strong, courageous, good men and women of character and determination. God bless America. Spacious skies and purple mountain majesties and swimming in the creek. God bless America. Dinner on the ground at church and all-day singing. God bless America. And of course, BASEBALL. God bless America – mended, confirmed, and refined. **But** we are also part of another story: A Prince of Peace, born in a stable, hung on a stick, and raised from a sepulcher. Citizens of two worlds, a country and a kingdom. Because the biblical story trumps the American story, it is to the Bible and not the Declaration of Independence that we turn.

Now, Naaman was a powerful general, but, he had leprosy. Even generals can't escape **the contingencies** of life. The king and his court were helpless. No matter how much we criticize, presidents can't heal and save. They can't walk on water, stop the approach of hurricanes, or eliminate the oil from the Gulf of Mexico.

Governments have flaws. Governments disappoint. The genius of our Republic is that only about 50% - 60% of the public is disappointed every four years. It is disappointing to see a Congress where party is more important than policy. It is disappointing that all nine justices of the Supreme Court will now be from the Ivy League. How many times have we failed to protect our environment from greed? During the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt, lumber barons and railroad executives were devastating the forests of this country, and President Roosevelt, a Republican president, stopped them in their tracks. When giant corporations overreached, President Roosevelt, a Republican president, promoted immediate federal intervention in regulating corporations. President Roosevelt was a servant of God when he created millions of acres for national forests, national parks, and wildlife refuges for the future enjoyment of Americans. Part of our family is worshiping this morning at the Chapel of Transfiguration at the entrance to the Grand Teton National Park, and our son is preaching and celebrating Holy Communion there.

Like the country, the church has flaws. God's people have almost an addictive attraction to idols. No wonder God put "You shall have no other gods before me," as the first of the commandments. We can't cover all the idols, but here are two. Keep in mind that a primary weapon of idolatry is illusion. Tertullian, ancient church father, wrote of "men already civilized and under the very illusions of their culture." Julian Hartt claims that we love illusion. "To be is to be self-deceived? How's that for an axiom?" America parading herself as a Christian nation is a bad idea; bad for the nation, bad for the church. How many towns are having Fourth of July Parades this morning instead of encouraging people to attend church?

There's the idol of **faith and patriotism that produces a hybrid religion that is not Christian**. Last Sunday, in the Tyler daily newspaper, there was a two page ad by a Baptist Church offering a four-day Celebration of Freedom. Rock climbing wall, quad pod, inflatables, petting zoo, train rides, games, prizes, antique car show, puppets, boat rides, with three Sunday services built around the theme, "I love America ." There's not one mention of Jesus or the cross. Loving America is fine; worshiping America is idolatry. How long will churches, left and right, sell their eternal birthright for a mess of collard greens to the politicians? After all, if you arrive at the gates of heaven bearing nothing but an American flag as your credentials, you won't gain entrance. Naaman had to strip off all the accoutrements of national power, and stand in the Jordan River for his healing. Politics is a game; only God can heal and save. Politicians use the church, and it seems the church is glad to be used. Listen, Christians have a higher loyalty than old glory and it is the glory of God. America, in spite of her illusions of

exceptionalism, is not God's chosen nation. The church doesn't need political power; the church needs to be in the public square offering a theological critique of our culture. The church is supposed to be a kingdom of priests not a collection of politicians.

When Naaman heard the word of God to go wash in the Jordan River, he exploded in anger because he was convinced that his own rivers, back in Syria, were far superior. Politicians are always sure their rivers, their ways, their ideas, their proposals are superior.

The honorable Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama recently said that Justice Thurgood Marshall was **outside the mainstream** of American politics. What matters is not the "mainstream" of American politics but whether or not we are in God's mainstream: the river of life: "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." That God's mainstream. We can think we are in the mainstream only to discover we are in a mud hole. Consider American in the 1950's and 1960's: the so-called mainstream was polluted with racism, and George Wallace was floating in it down in Alabama. From Gov. Wallace's first inaugural address: "Today I have stood, where once **Jefferson Davis** stood. From this **Cradle of the Confederacy**, this very **Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland**, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny . . . and I say segregation today, segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever." That's not the mainstream. In fact, it's the wrong river!

Compare the words of Justice Marshall with those of Governor Wallace: We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred and the mistrust. We must dissent from the poverty of vision and the absence of moral leadership. We must dissent because America can do better, because America has no choice but to do better.

A second idol of the church is relevance. Offered a cure for his leprosy, Naaman protested: "I thought that **for me** he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy." **FOR ME.** Give me some magic; make this religious stuff interesting. "Make it relevant preacher." Relevance is always about the self. Relevance makes the church human-centered. Churches that put anthropology ahead of theology are guilty of idolatry. "Relevance is such an unquestioned idol of contemporary society that many congregations have grown by marketing their ability to provide relevant programs, music, and preaching. Churches fall over themselves to make God relevant for you, but when they do this, God ceases to be God and becomes instead just one more optional

resource.” We are not self-made men and women but created by God, in the image of God, and for the glory of God. The story is not about us. **Isn't that a blessing?** .

The story is God's story, and we are called to tell that story. There's an independence day for the world: Jesus sets the world free through his death and resurrection. The way out of idolatry is a return to our original baptist practice: WITNESS. Let's stop imitating the culture and whining over our loss of cultural dominance and turn loose our powerful witness. Instead of promoting relevance, let's tell the good news. Luke 10 offers us a vision of a church “going out” two by two for conversions. We are here because Jesus, as Lord of life, has been raised from the dead. Independence Day was Easter, A. D. 30.

Well, on this Fourth of July let's declare our independence from the cultural religion of America. Provide freedom for everyone. Leave out no one. Let's give this city a church which combines fundamental Christian convictions with a radical social ethic. Let's provide this city a church with a consistent witness that Jesus is fully human and fully God, and that the church would not exist if Jesus were not raised from the dead. And may God mend my every flaw and yours and America's. And may God bless the Church!