

Sermon – Sixth Sunday After Pentecost (Independence Day)

Scripture Texts: Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Psalm 145; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *We are called not to greatness, but to faithfully reflect our unique part of the image of God – the God whose boundary crossing love brings unity out of diversity and leads us into an ever more perfect union.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. The shining city on a hill?
 - a. How many of you are familiar with the image of a shining city on a hill?
 - i. It is a powerful image, drawing on language that Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount. Moreover, in connection with America, it traces back to a famous sermon given by John Winthrop at the founding of Boston in 1630.
 - ii. This image has been used by many to define the American spirit and purpose. In fact, this image was used by almost every president from Kennedy onward.
 - iii. But, unquestionably the image is best known for its use by President Reagan to define and promote his view of American exceptionalism. In his farewell address to the nation at the end of his presidency, Reagan explicitly described what he meant by “the shining city on a hill”: “in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.”
 - b. The problem of American exceptionalism
 - i. This is a powerful image, and the idea of American exceptionalism has been deeply moving to so many of us. But it is not without its problems.
 - ii. To say that America is exceptional can make an idol of this nation, valuing it above all others. Such greatness generally comes at the expense of others, tearing them down to raise ourselves up, and refusing to see their beauty and their aspect of God’s image.
 - iii. I found it very interesting that John Winthrop, in his famous sermon, spoke to this danger, warning of harsh judgment for those who use God’s blessings to seek greatness rather than to serve and provide for their neighbors.
 - c. A vision of American greatness
 - i. So, what are we to do with this image? There is a beauty in Reagan’s image, and there is a reality to American generosity. One of my heroes, C.S. Lewis, suggests that nations do have particular identities and can, like individual humans, reflect aspects of our creator. So, what unique perspective might America have to offer?
 - ii. I am struck by the similarity between today’s reading from Deuteronomy and the poem, *The New Colossus*, which is found in the base of the Statue of Liberty. This poem was written by Emma Lazarus, a young Jewish woman, to raise funds for the

pedestal of the Statue. It compares the Statue to the Colossus of Rhodes, a wonder of the ancient world that was “brazen” and “conquering”, proclaiming the wealth and power and greatness of Rhodes to the world. In contrast, the Statue of Liberty is the “Mother of Exiles,” inviting the world to “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” In this care and compassion, I see the reflection of the God who “who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.” This God calls us to join in that work of loving and welcoming the stranger.

- iii. Perhaps our unique call, as Americans, is to reflect this aspect of God’s love. John Winthrop argued in his famous sermon that all love is rooted in similarity – that we love things and people who are like us. But that is not what we see when we look at Jesus, or the God of the Bible. Rather, we see a God whose love crosses boundaries, reaching out to those who are different. This is a God who brings together Jew and Gentile to make a new people. This is the Triune God, in whom love binds three distinct persons together as one God. Perhaps America, at its best, can reflect this God, this unifying love. That is my hope, when I dare to hope.
2. “All of these died in faith without having received the promises...”
 - a. But, it is especially important – as our nation reflects on the past 250 years and considers what the future will look like – to be honest about the fact that we have so often failed to live into this calling.
 - b. We read in Hebrews about the faith of those who have gone before us – about the many who “died in faith without having received the promises” of God. And, if we are honest, there have been so many Americans who have lived and died in the pursuit, not just of happiness, but life and liberty and equality.
 - i. They have been the prophets, people like Frederick Douglas, Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, and Matthew Shepherd – pointing toward the American ideals and saying, “Not. Yet.” We say that all men were created equal, but our actions don’t yet consistently affirm that belief.
 - ii. They have been the saints, like Absalom Jones, Sojourner Truth, Dr. King, and Bishop Gene Robinson, who have seen a vision even greater than the American ideals, and who have trusted in a God who loves them and has created them in God’s image; they have persevered not just because they believe in America, but because they believe that “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice”!
 - iii. These prophets and saints, and so many others of every race and nationality, have trusted that God is bending that arc, that God will see it through to completion in the end – and that they have an opportunity to make a contribution to that dream.
 - c. As we celebrate 250 years of American history, these are the voices we must especially elevate! As Hebrews assures us, “God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, God has prepared a city for them.”
 3. Jesus’ call to perfection
 - a. At the same time, I’m sure you know that there are some voices today arguing that we should not dwell on our failures and imperfections. They claim that talking about these failings is a sign of hate, destined to tear us apart, and that we should focus instead on our

strengths, on our triumphs. But, I believe, that is to choose the Colossus of Rhodes over the Statue of Liberty.

- b. Even more, that is to fundamentally mistake the ways of God!
 - i. The boundary crossing, unifying love of God is not rooted in similarity, but in abundant generosity. The love between the members of the Trinity is so great that it cannot be contained; it spills out, seeking and creating new beings to love.
 - ii. This is why Jesus calls us to love not just those who love us, not just our brothers and sisters, but even those who persecute us and call us enemy.
 - iii. This is hard, costly, and sometimes dangerous work. It is not work that nations are often willing to embrace, but it is the work of those who follow Jesus. It is the work of those who know themselves to be the cherished objects of God's abundant, boundary crossing love!
- c. And, thankfully, we are not called to get it all perfect.
 - i. Strange to say that when Jesus is specifically calling us to be perfect in our Gospel reading!
 - ii. But the word being used for "perfect" is τέλειός, which does not speak of being without fault or error; rather, this perfection is completion or maturity. It can even speak to a unified community.
 - iii. No way to mature except by making mistakes and learning from them. That is why we need to listen to the prophetic voices, to love our enemies: that we might learn and grow into the full stature of Jesus.
 - iv. So, may we have the courage and imagination to seek not the brazen greatness of power and wealth, but to live with great faithfulness into our unique calling – as individuals and as a nation. May we not fear the dark parts of our story, but learn from them, that we might better know and share God's boundless love. May we be not a city on a hill, shining with our own glory, but children of the light, walking with Jesus toward a more perfect union.

Amen.

Notes:

- Matthew 5:48 – “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” The word being used is τέλειός, which does not speak of being without fault or error; rather, this perfection is completion or maturity. It can even speak to a unified community.
- Hebrews 11 – “All these died without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” – There is a strong connection here to the conversation between Ta-Nahesi Coates and Ezra Klein, in the wake of the Charlie Kirk assassination:

I’m Ta-Nehesi Coates, I’m the writer, I’m the individual, right? But I am part of something larger, and I’ve always felt myself as part of something larger. I have a tradition, I have ancestry, I have heritage. What that means is that I do whatever I do within the time that I have in my life, whatever time I’m gifted with, and much of what I do is built on what other people did before them. Then, after that, I leave the struggle where I leave it, and hopefully, it’s in a better place. Oftentimes it’s not. That’s the history in fact. And then my progeny, they pick it up, and they keep it going. I am descended from people who, in their lifetime, fought with all their might for the destruction of chattel slavery in this country. And they never saw it. They never saw it. In my personal belief system, they died in defeat, in darkness. So I guess the privilege that I draw out of this, the honor that I draw out of this, is not that things will necessarily be better in my lifetime, but that I will make the contribution that I am supposed to make.
- There have been so many Americans who have lived and died in the pursuit, not just of happiness, but life and liberty and equality. They have been the prophets, pointing toward these American ideals and saying, “Not. Yet. We’re not there yet!” They have been the saints who have seen a vision even greater than the American ideals, who have trusted in a God who loves them and has created them in God’s image; they have persevered not just because they believe in America, but because they believe that “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice”! They have trusted that God is bending that arc, and will see it through to completion in the end – and that they have an opportunity to make a contribution to that dream.
- Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” This line comes from a poem, *The New Colossus*, written to raise money for the pedestal of the statue. It contrasts the Statute of Liberty with the Colossus of Rhodes, which was brazen and conquering. The Statue, in contrast, is “Mother of Exiles”. The author, Emma Lazarus, was a young woman and a Jew; she was particularly interested in helping Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in Russia and eastern Europe.
- “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” This line originally comes from John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity*, given onboard the *Arbella* at the founding of Boston.
 - It was largely lost to memory until brought forward by the work of Perry Miller, a Harvard scholar of history and literature who helped to establish the field of American studies. Miller used Winthrop, and the Puritans, as a means of defining the spirit and purpose of America.

- The imagery has been used by almost every president from Kennedy onward, Republican and Democrat. But it was especially used by Reagan to establish and promote his view of American exceptionalism. He explained it in detail in his farewell address:

The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the "shining city upon a hill." The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

- Winthrop's sermon actually promotes a strong, supportive, sacrificial community – it's hard to read it without feeling some tension with the ideology of Make America Great Again. Indeed, Winthrop warns against seeking greatness!
- But, Winthrop also makes (what I see as) a profound mistake in his sermon. He roots love and unity in similarity, so that we love what is like us. He even goes so far as to say that God's love for us is rooted in our bearing God's image...so that we are "like" God. I want to challenge this with Trinitarian theology: Love is defined in the binding together of the three persons of the Trinity in the one unity of God. Christian love is not based in, or limited by, similarity! Christian love crosses boundaries, seeks out and cares for those who are different (especially those who have been rejected or abused!), and builds toward unity / completion / perfection.