

Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

July 5, 2015

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American Gospel

Proverbs 21:1-3; 15; 21

Matthew 5:1-12

As some of you know, I begin my sermons with a joke just to get your attention. Well, it is hard to find Fourth of July humor, but an 8 year old from Kentucky named Tom asks: "How is a healthy person like the United States? -- They both have good constitutions!" Tom also asks the question: "Did you hear the one about the Liberty Bell? -- Yeah, it cracked me up!"

The Fourth of July weekend was coming up, and the nursery school teacher took the opportunity to tell her class about patriotism. "We live in a great country," she said. "One of the things we should be happy is that, in this country, we are all free." A little boy came walking up to her from the back of the room. He stood with his hands on his hips and said, "I'm not free. I'm four."

Independence Day . . . The Fourth of July has become a day for us to show off our national pride. We have parades and carnivals and awesome firework displays each year. It used to be that instead of the Fourth of July being a national day of bragging, it was a national day of prayer and repentance. It was a solemn occasion for remembering the courageous political step taken on that day in 1776. It was a time to consider the weight of responsibility we all hold as members of a democratic society. Instead of a time to party, the Fourth of July and the days surrounding it used to be days for national repentance, humility and heartfelt prayer. It was a time when the United States of America would take itself much more seriously and humbly.

So on this Fourth of July weekend 2015, I would like for us to return to the idea of looking more solemnly, more prayerfully at what was intended on that July 4th, 1776. What did America's leaders have in mind for us as a new nation and especially in terms of religion?

Jon Meacham, former editor of Newsweek magazine and current executive vice president of Random House, as well as a respected historian and best selling author, wrote a book called *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*.

One of my favorite sections of this book is part of the appendix, where Meacham lists the Biblical verses that Presidents have chosen for their inaugurations. Traditionally, when a President takes the oath of office, HE (and as we know they have all been HEs) places his hand on a Bible, and the Bible is usually opened up to a particular place . . . to the verse or verses chosen by the new President. It wasn't until 1837, when Martin Van Buren was sworn into office, that the chosen verses have been recorded. It is fascinating to see what scripture passage Presidents have chosen. Rarely do they chose a passage that has been used by another President, yet our two scripture lessons for this morning, represent verses chosen more than once.

Andrew Johnson and James Garfield were both drawn to Proverbs 21: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." A verse that shows humility and a willingness to trust in the Lord.

Our passage from the New Testament is what we know as the Beatitudes and these familiar verses were used by Harry Truman and George H. W. Bush. Both of these Presidents used the entire passage, not just a verse as often is the practice. They did not just focus on "Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" but both Truman and Bush wanted to be

guided by all of these verses that hold up as blessed so many different people: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness' sake and those who are persecuted because of their belief and faith in God.

Throughout our nation's history, Presidents and other leaders have sought to recognize God and this was true of the Founding Leaders of our new nation yet just as is true now, back in the 1700s they were not all unified in their understanding and belief in God.

There is a wonderful story in Jon Meacham's book that explains how one of America's first fights was over faith. As the Founding Leaders gathered for the inaugural session of the Continental Congress on Tuesday, September 6, 1774, at Carpenters' Hall, right here in Philadelphia, Thomas Cushing, a lawyer from Boston, moved that the delegates begin the session with a prayer. Both John Jay of New York and John Rutledge, a rich lawyer-planter from South Carolina, objected. Their reasoning, according to John Adams in a letter he wrote to his wife, Abigail, was that "because we were so divided in religious sentiments" (the Congress included Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and others). And so Adams explained to his wife: "we could not join in the same act of worship."

John Adams continued to recount the story by explaining that then Samuel Adams of Boston spoke up. John wrote to Abigail: "Mr. S. Adams arose and said he was no bigot, and could hear a prayer from a gentleman of piety and virtue who was at the same time a friend to his country." John Adams' letter continued: Sam Adams "was a stranger in Philadelphia, but had heard that Mr. Duche deserved that character, and therefore he moved that Mr. Duche, an Episcopal clergyman, might be desired to read prayers to the Congress tomorrow morning. The motion was seconded and passed in the affirmative."

The next morning the Reverend Duche appeared, dressed in clerical garb and read the psalm of that day according to the Episcopalian lectionary. It was Psalm 35. The delegates of this assembly had recently heard rumors, which later were proved to be unfounded, that the British were about to attack Boston, which if they overtook this seaport could have turned the outcome of the revolution around. So in the hall, as delegates worried about the Continental Army being under attack from the world's mightiest empire, the priest read from the psalm: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me."

"Fight against them that fight against me." John Adams was at once stunned and moved. "I never saw a greater effect upon an audience," he told Abigail. "It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that morning."

And thus began a long tradition of our government leaders beginning their sessions acknowledging God, tolerantly and ecumenically, for their beliefs in this God were different.

These early leaders of our country, these who signed the Declaration of Independence, were politicians and philosophers. They were churchmen and also doubters. You had George Washington who was not known to have ever taken communion, and supposedly, one bishop who knew him was confident Washington was not a believer. Thomas Jefferson would use a knife to literally cut out of his bible certain verses in the New Testament, but made sure the local priest buried him. Benjamin Franklin is known to have re-written the Lord's Prayer into the 18th-century conversational language, but yet his piety had its limits, like when he fell asleep in a Philadelphia Quaker meeting-house. Something none of us good Christians have ever done, RIGHT? All of our Founding Leaders were devoted to liberty, but most kept slaves. All were devoted to virtue, but many led private lives that the

more religious among us would say were sinful.

What our Founding Leaders sought was a nation built upon a belief in a higher being. A being that is in ultimate control but not necessarily the God of Abraham or the God of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

A common misconception is that our country was formed as a "Christian Nation," but America's first leaders specifically said that the country was not founded "in any sense" on the Christian faith. In fact, George Washington, in a letter to a synagogue, promised his Jewish countrymen that the government would "give to bigotry no sanction." Jefferson, emphasizing the spirit of religious freedom, wrote, "Our minds and hearts are free to believe everything or nothing at all . . . and it is our duty to protect and perpetuate this sacred culture of freedom." And then in 1797, the Senate of our country ratified a treaty between America and Muslim Tripoli that declared "the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."

America is not, nor was ever intended to be, a Christian nation but it has been a nation of Christians. And arguments regarding the role of religion and specifically Christianity in our nation's government have continued over the 200 plus years of our history.

Look at the tension surrounding the American Civil War which was fought by two regions of our nation, both believing they were fighting for the right as defined by God . . . by our Christian God. That both sides could, as Lincoln put it, pray to the same God and read the same Bible yet invoke the aid of that God against the other was a question that haunted this President throughout the war. This same tension was present in the expansion of the rights of women and throughout the civil rights movement. The Old and New Testaments were used to defend both sides of the arguments. More recently we see the same type of conflict, in the name of religion, through the battle over rights for gays and lesbians. And isn't it interesting that these same disagreements among those in government have been played out, in the same ways, in the church . . . in the Christian Church, represented by many denominations in our country. We can all pray to the same God and read the same Bible, as Lincoln said, and invoke the aid of that God and Biblical teachings against one another. Some things never change.

Does religion belong in the halls of government? Interesting question, and one that our Founding Leaders would say, "Yes!" to but at the same time they also believed in a separation between the church and the state. Their hope was that religion would shape the life of the nation without strangling it.

Faith, meaning a belief in a higher power, has always been at the heart of our national experience and yet America is a nation founded upon the principles of liberty and freedom and tolerance and humility. Every American is free to exercise his or her own faith or no faith at all.

Some believe that our country is being hypocritical when it comes to having a separation of church and state, while at the same time Congress prays and hires a chaplain while "In God We Trust" is on our money. And "So Help Me God" is in the Oath of Office. And "God Save the United States and this Honorable Court" is announced at the start of proceedings before the United States Supreme Court.

Is this hypocritical? Our Founding Leaders would say, "No!" in that they sought to build the foundation for a nation that would acknowledge the existence of a Creator God who is interested in the affairs of the world and who will one day offer reward or punishment for what we do here. But that also we are a nation that respects the right of everyone to believe or not believe in whatever God they

choose. It is a delicate balancing act, and it has obvious inconsistencies and ones that are often put to the test but it has still served us well and we should guard it well and celebrate it joyfully.

So what? So what about the role of the church in all of this? After all, that is why we are here . . . not so much for an American History lesson but for understanding how God, the one we worship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is calling us to live.

First, I will say that we need to respect the idea of separation between church and state. It is not up to Christians to impose our faith upon our nation, just as I do not want our U.S. government trying to enforce the church to believe and act a certain way. We need to be tolerant and humble. We need to respect liberty and freedom and not insist on our own way but allow people to worship and believe as they desire.

The Church must also pray for our country, demonstrating that we do believe in what is written on our currency: "In God We Trust." In 2nd Chronicles we read: "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, I will hear and heal their land." If we pray for our country God will hear and heal our land of the injustice and evil that plagues us.

I also think that, as Christians, we can be a moral conscience of our society and that should affect how we vote. We should apply our beliefs to how we elect our leaders, considering if their policies promote justice and peace. Do their policies favor the widows and orphans of our society, the oppressed and disenfranchised? This doesn't mean I am endorsing any particular political party. The saying is true: God is not a Republican or a Democrat. God is on the side of justice and mercy!

As the Church, we also can exercise our moral conscience by using our voice to advocate for those things the prophet Micah tells us that the Lord requires of us: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God." We need to use our voice and our collective power, especially to bring about justice and mercy for those without a voice.

In doing these things we are being faithful to both the intentions of the God we love and also the intentions of our Founding Leaders who we honor this weekend. In doing these things we are not trying to create a Christian nation, but we are striving to be faithful Christians in our nation, calling our nation's attention to God's righteousness and justice.

Thanks be to God. Amen.