

**An American's Right to Vote:  
...Standeth God Within the Shadow, Keeping Watch Above His Own"**  
*(James Russell Lowell)*

**Kallam Grove Christian Pulpit**  
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Election Tuesday is a day when most Americans will not exercise the right that much of the rest of the world would walk miles and stand in the snow to exercise. I challenge you to vote, I urge you, I beg you, to cast your vote for local, county, state, and national leaders. My mother was 59 years old when I became eligible to vote in 1956. Both of us cast our first-ever vote that year and I have never failed since that time to vote in every election. I love America. In America, I am thankful for the privilege of a free pulpit with free speech to preach the Good News of the Gospel. In most countries, public speech is a government license; in America it is an inalienable right. I cannot express what this sacred privilege means to me.

In the sixth grade I was required to memorize a speech for my initiation into public speaking. The title of that speech was "I Am An American" by Elias Lieberman, an American whose father was a Russian immigrant. He shared what his father told him the American flag meant as they sailed into New York Harbor to land at the feet of the Statue of Liberty. There the lady of freedom lifted her lamp beside the golden door. His son knew of the horrors of life as a Jew in Russia, but he said to his son,

*But then the dream came--the dream of America in the light of the liberty torch. The atom of dust became a man, the straw in the wind became a woman for the first time., 'That flag of stars and stripes is yours. It is the emblem of the promised land. It means, my son the hope of humanity. Live for it; die for it. And under the open sky of my new country. I swore to do so. And every drop of blood in me will keep that vow. I am proud of my future. I am an American.*

I probably rehearsed that speech several hundred times before Mrs. Joyner took Carlene and me to Stoneville to compete against girls and boys from the other county elementary schools. We both won, incidentally, but more importantly, even though I had never seen an immigrant, internalizing that speech made a lasting impression on me of what a marvelous melting pot America is.

On January 26, 1986, I was sitting with a family in the surgical waiting room of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte. Everyone was watching television because the spaceship "Challenger" was about to be launched into space by NASA at Cape Kennedy. Seven seconds into the flight, it exploded and all seven of our astronauts died. I also heard about a scout master who had some connections with NASA and got one of the astronauts to take their scout troop flag on board the spaceship. When it blew up, he inquired repeatedly of NASA if anyone saw the flag among the debris collected. Weeks went by then one day when he called, someone said that they had indeed found his troop's flag. They folded it into a triangle like the ones given to spouses at military funerals. The troop still has that flag today. It is to the scout troop what it was to that little Russian immigrant boy, and to me, and to all of us--the emblem of the promised land.

**Now let's talk philosophy and religion.** Behind the written law of our constitution is a substratum of belief in natural law—the law that the prophet Jeremiah said would supersede the Ten Commandments!

- Those laws of **Moses** were carved into stone tablets, but the natural law is written, Jeremiah said, in our hearts.
- **Cicero** of ancient Rome wrote that natural law is the highest reason, implanted in our nature as free people, that instinctively tells us what ought to be done and what is wrong to do.
- These are what **Thomas Jefferson** wrote about in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

That, my friends is freedom, and without freedom there is no United States of America as our founding fathers envisioned it and established it.

The morning after the Constitutional Convention closed in 1787, a woman on the streets of Philadelphia asked Benjamin Franklin, "Mr. Franklin, what kind of government have you given us?" **He answered, "A Republic, madam, if you can keep it." It is a good question and it lives today.** In 1961, President Kennedy challenged us: "Ask not what your country can do for you but rather what you can do for your country." Can a republic survive if there are more receivers than providers? Are we willing to make the sacrifices that it takes to live beyond what the press calls "red and blue" America? We must challenge ourselves, regardless of the outcome of the election, to all live under the flag that is red for valor, blue for sincerity, and white for innocence? Can we do that? It depends. Lincoln raised that question in the Gettysburg Address: “We are now engaged in a great civil war, **testing whether this nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.**” The answer is not in our partisan politics, but in our internal morality.

Someone has said that religion and integrity is what we do when no one is watching. What is the moral fiber of our character? We are not good to be praised or recognized or honored; **we are good because we have the option of good or evil and we choose to be decent, honest, and worthy of our salt.** When Cain killed his brother Abel, as recorded on page two of most Bibles, God asked what he had done. Cain asked the question we still ask when we have broken God's natural moral law; he sarcastically asked, “Am I my brother's keeper? **Well, are we? Will our morality temper our love for money so that as free people, we can escape the temptations of greed and the will of the strong over the weak?**

**When we come here Sunday after Sunday, we are casting a vote in favor of being our brother's keeper and living into our American creed of liberty and justice for all.** “James O'Kelly, founder of the Christian Church, and a relatively unlettered man loved the principles of John Wesley, a professor at Oxford University and founder of Methodism. Both insisted that we are made in the image of God and that means **we are born with an instinctive sense what is moral and what is ethical, what is right and what is wrong.** We call it "conscience." David wrote in Psalm 51 that *God desires truth in our inner being and wisdom in our secret heart.* St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “*I delight in the law of God in my inmost self.*” **We call it conscience and believe that America is not a police state and not a nation of strangling regulations but a nation where free people can make moral decisions if their conscience is guided by God's spirit.**

The scripture in II Chronicles 7:14 needs memorizing: *“If my people who are called my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land.”* So, the secret of this noble experiment makes it and our survival will be attributed to some kind of religious revival of obedience to our inner voice, this natural law of God, written on what we call “our hearts.”

When John F. Kennedy delivered his first Inaugural Address in 1961, he said, **“I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago. The world is different now, and yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forefathers found are still an issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”** On the day that he was assassinated, Kennedy was to have given a luncheon speech in Dallas, Texas. I read the manuscript in the Kennedy Library in Massachusetts. Could it be providentially that the speech ended with the admonition that Americans are destined by God to be watchmen on the walls of world freedom and then to quote from Psalm 127: *“Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.”*

I do believe America is exceptional and I do not believe God is finished with the mission with which he inspired us in 1776.

In 1945 when Winston Churchill was shockingly defeated by the British people, he had already been invited by President Truman to come to America and speak. His defeat as Prime Minister put Truman in a box; to invite the former head of the British government might offend the new prime minister who was of the opposite political party. President Truman solved his dilemma by calling the president of an obscure little Presbyterian college in Fulton, Missouri and asking them to take Churchill and let him speak in a place no one would hear about. It was there at Westminster College that Churchill warned the western world that Soviet Communism had built an **“iron curtain”** through Europe, dividing it between freedom and bondage, between democratic capitalism and state socialism. I have been on that little campus and heard the tape of that speech that was literally heard around the world and etched into the memory of that generation of humankind. ,

Joan and I have led three of our grandsons hear the tape at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin where President Reagan said to Soviet Premier Gorbachev, **“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”** Joan and I have taken three of our grandchildren to walk in the middle of the street in Berlin where the Berlin wall once stood and to that block-long remainder of the wall that was exactly what Churchill called it—an iron curtain.

And yet we in America have not always lived out our own creeds and we have paid a great price for our sins. I remember my personal shock in 1961 when I took a carload of high school youth twenty miles into Statesville to a youth rally where the music was to be provided by the Bennett College choir of Greensboro. Bennett is a college for black women. They were very late; indeed the meeting was ending when they finally arrived. I can still picture the choir director when he walked to the pulpit and explained their tardiness. It was a Sunday. They left Bennett before the cafeteria opened. There was no café or restaurant between Greensboro and Statesville where they could eat supper. Their only option was to go through Salisbury and eat at Livingston College, another school for black students. There they were told they must wait until the Livingstone Students had finished before the Bennett belles could eat. So the combination of white

segregation and the lack of black hospitality made them an hour late getting to Statesville to sing. I hardly slept that night as I remembered what it was like to work in tobacco alongside my black friends and skinny dip with them and play cow pasture baseball with them on an equal basis, but see them walking four miles to Laticue School on Tom Garrett Fuquay's farm on Angell Road to learn to read and write. I was twenty-six years old, and it was the first time I realized the sin of segregation. I knew then that my beloved south had been in league with the devil for generations and black people were destined to overcome segregation.

The 2012 election might have racial undertones, but it is not about race. It is about the honest differences of political philosophy. It is about the extent of government regulations, it is about economic philosophy on how to create jobs, , it is about both the ethics and costs of health insurance, it is about entitlements of several sorts, it is about right to life and right of women's choices regarding abortion, it is about taxes and spending, it is about foreign policy in China and hot spots like Bengahzi and Syria and Pakistan and Sudan and Mali and Egypt and Israel and Iran and yes, Iraq and Afghanistan. This world is a mess--always has been, always will be.

I am excited about our right to determine these choices with ballots rather than bullets. Yet I am scared because emotions are near what they were in 1860. Can we rise up to what is right? Let me close with two stories of what I see as the soul of America.

I don't know if it were politically wised or not, and you might well disagree with me, but I think what Governor Christie did to allow President Obama to come to New Jersey in the afternoon of Superstorm Sandy was a good thing. A week before the most volatile and emotional election in decades, I saw America when I saw a Republican Governor and a Democrat President standing side by side, complementing each other's respective role in human relief.

When President Reagan, a Republican from California, was shot seventy days after his inauguration in 1981, the speaker of the House of Representatives was Tip O'Neill, a democrat from Boston. One of the first visitors allowed to Reagan's bedside was Speaker O'Neill. Tip said later that he was shocked at how gaunt and frail the president looked. Indeed, tears began rolling down the cheeks of both old Irish Americans. **And the Democrat Speaker of the House leaned over and kissed the face of the Republican President and the two men repeated together the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Even the Secret Service in the room cried.**

That my friends, is the spirit and soul of America. That is our recipe for renewal. I believe in the separation of church and state, but if we do not weave our religious values into our politics, our days as a free people upon the earth will be shortened and we will go the way of all other democracies on the ash heap of history. Yes, with James Russell Lowell in the dark hours of the Civil War, I believe that God stands within the shadows, keeping watch above his own.

O Lord of hosts, be with us yet; lest we forget; lest we forget. If you have not voted, say your prayers and vote your conscience. Amen