

“Religion in Our National Heritage”

Sermon: Glencoe United Methodist Church

July 7, 2019

The colors of July 4 are **RED**, **WHITE** and **BLUE**. The songs are “God Bless America,” and “America the Beautiful” and a prayer: “Our father’s God to Thee, Author of liberty, to thee we sing.” The older ones among us learned these in our public school classrooms. Their theme is patriotism.

Yet, as July 4, 2019, approached a new genre of resistance expressed itself. Some will not salute the flag and say the pledge of allegiance. Some will not stand for the national anthem. Even more will not put their hand on their heart as the national anthem is played. In 1980, 92% of Americans were “very proud to be an American” with no distinction between political parties. In 2019, that had shrunk to 74% of those identifying with one party and 32% of those identifying with the other.

What we are experiencing today is almost without precedent in any country in history. No country historically has beaten itself for sins of the past like we are doing today. **What is happening? Why are so many people objecting to our being patriotic?** I believe that patriotism is Providential. The German philosopher, Hegel, was wise when he wrote that “History is a long book that records how God’s providence has had a hand in the history of nations because **nations are made up of men and women making free choices, and our choices may either help or hinder the purposes of God.**” He went on to insist that **the Hand of God is as influential in the soul of a nation as in the soul of a single person. Our soul is more than what goes to heaven when we die; our soul is what distinguishes us from the animals at the zoo.** Out of our soul comes our willingness to sacrifice, to care, to be a Good Samaritan or simply a neighbor. So it is that collectively speaking, a nation has a soul.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence placed their signatures on the document, pledging “their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.” Eleven years later many of the same men drafted the preamble to our United States Constitution with the goal of forming “a more perfect union.” Note the language—not “perfect” but more nearly perfect. As time passes, nations, like individuals, gain **more insight and more light into the meaning of what it means to love mercy, and do justice, and walk humbly with God.**

- By the light we have today, I know we did not treat the Indians right.
- By the light we have today, I know that slavery was a horrible and cruel practice.
- By the light we have today, we know segregation was unfair.

Is the soul of America still stained with our cultural sins? Absolutely. But generation after generation the conscience of America has been quickened by the spirit of God and we did not continue in the wrongs. I mention only a few examples of America’s soul:

- **The American soul is seen in** the Christians who opposed slavery before blood was shed in 1861—and many did, including some who lived in the South. (Only 17% had slaves)
- **The soul of America is seen in** the Wesleyan Methodists who insisted on the abolishment of slavery and left the mother church in 1843.
- **The soul of America is seen in the** Quakers who steadfastly opposed slavery. In Guilford and Randolph Counties they established what was called the “underground railroad” from Jamestown, North Carolina to free states in the north. The Quakers put double floors in two horse wagons to conceal the slaves who lay underneath for days.
- **The soul of America is seen in** the hundreds of thousands of “Yankee boys” **who owned no slaves** themselves but gave their limb and life to free over four million of God’s children who were enslaved.
- **The soul of America is seen in the South for finally admitting that all God’s children bleed the same color of blood. As we read in our Bibles in Genesis 1:27, we are all “made in the image of God.”**
- **The soul of America is expressed every time** we Southerners proudly sing the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” **with its lyrics, “He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”** We sing that song with gusto, knowing that the South was where the song says that the grapes of wrath were stored.
- **The soul of America was regaled to the world as General Colin Powell told the U. N. General Assembly, “The only real estate we claimed with our recent war victories around the globe was space to bury our dead.”**
- **The soul of America** was demonstrated in 1963 when my timid mother asked me to take her and Lessie Phillips, a Black American woman, to sign up for Social Security. Both had been born the same day—August 7, 1897. Mama had a family Bible to prove her date of birth; Lessie had no documentation. When the woman said she could not approve Lessie for Social Security, my mother’s little black Welsh eyes narrowed as she said, “We were both born the same day and played together as little girls; if you don’t give Lessie hers, don’t give me mine.” The lady relented! Years later I met with twenty-two of Lessie’s progeny at Hayes Memorial Methodist Church near Madison. They handed out enlarged copies of Lessie’s Social Security card! Mama never challenged segregation; she simply loved Lessie and all other Black people in her circle of relationships.

Certainly, we should not be uncritical of our country. But we must applaud our constitution that has been the instrument for remedying our failures and correcting our wrongs. No nation has worked my faithfully to extend freedom to others and to be a force for good. We are not mean; we are not cruel; we are not blinded by racial hatred. We are exceptional. In the 1840’s the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled all over America as a foreign critic. He concluded, “America is great because America is good. If America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.” Love of country gives us identity, gives us kinship, gives us neighborhoods like this one where I learned goodness from a few godly women. It gives us something to celebrate mutually.

James Russell Lowell expressed wisdom with these lines: “Slowly the bible of the race is writ—not the one on paper leaves or sheets of stone. Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it—texts of despair and hope, or joy or moans. While swings the sea, while mists the mountains shroud, while thunders’ surges burst on cliffs of cloud, it’s at the prophets’ feet the nations sit.”

When I was the last boy chosen at recess time in the sixth grade at Bethany School in 1946, the teacher asked me to stay during recess. She gave me a declamation entitled **“I Am An American.”** I have it until this day. It is by the son of a Russian Jewish emigrant. She coached me for delivering it in a public speaking contest, the first thing I ever “won” in my life.

The speech is about a father and son as they stood on board a ship entering New York Harbor and saw the statue of Liberty. The father said to the boy who later wrote the speech, “‘See,’ ‘pointing to torch of liberty from the statue’s uplifted hand and the flag that fluttered nearby,’ **‘That flag of stars and stripes is now yours; it is the emblem of the promised land. It means, my son, the hope of humanity. Live for it; die for it.’** “The little boy wrote later as a man, **“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.”**

Also, patriotism in America has a religious element.

The civic separation of church and state does not mean that the United States is a secular culture. In reality, there are many documented statements, speeches, and prayers that reflect a vein of **religious** heritage in U.S. heritage. You can easily look up public prayers recorded by presidents from George Washington to George Bush.

- One dimension of this is the recorded public prayers of the civic leaders. One example is that when the Constitutional Convention in 1787 was stalemated in debate, it was Benjamin Franklin, not known for being a religious man, who said,

“I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God’s notice, it is probably that an empire can rise without God’s aid I believe that without his concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel in the Bible. I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one of the clergy of the city be requested to officiate at that service.” *(This edition of the prayer was written in cursive by Franklin at a later date.)* To this day, each house of Congress has a paid chaplain.
- The inscription on the Liberty Bell is from the Holy Bible, Leviticus 25:10b—“proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.
- In 1954 Congress added the words “under God” to the official Pledge of Allegiance.

- On July 30, 1956 “IN GOD WE TRUST” was ordered by the 84th Congress to be printed on every denomination of coinage and paper currency and was named, “the national motto.”
- Quite a surprise to most is that the first “food” served on the moon on July 20, 1969 was the bread and wine of Holy Communion from Buzz Aldrin’s Webster Presbyterian Church in Houston. That church still has “Lunar Communion” every July 4!
- Every grave in every battlefield cemetery associated with the United States military has either a Christian cross or a Jewish Star of David as a marker. Muslims have their marker too.

Adolph Hitler’s party was named the “National Socialist German Workers’ Party” and it was racist, idolatrous and evil. That is symptomatic of “nationalism.” As a Christian, I am not a nationalist, but I am proudly a patriot, loyal to my country under God. I can be; I must be; I will be. This union is not yet perfect and never will be, but. I will work as long as I have breath to help perfect it. I have a dream that our beloved country will have “liberty and justice for all.” And I ask you to join me in praying that God will bless our native land.

(Preached by Dr. Donald W. Haynes at Glencoe United Methodist Church near Summerfield, NC—his home church at which he received his “License to Preach” on May 11, 1954. He served as a Methodist preacher from October 1954 until his retirement in 1999; then taught sixteen years as Director of Wesleyan Studies at Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, NC. Glencoe will be his final resting place.