



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 9, JULY 3, 2022
2 KINGS 5:1-14; PSALM 30; GALATIANS 6:7-16; LUKE 10:1-11, 16-20

THE VALUES OF AN IMPERILED NATION



Collect for Proper 9 [O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.]

John Jay and John Rutledge are counted among the founders of this nation. Jay was a

New Yorker, and a fierce abolitionist; Rutledge was from South Carolina, and a

slave owner. Jay and Rutledge both served in the Continental Congress, and as governors of their states, before serving respectively as the first and second chief justices of the US Supreme Court. They brought their hegemony to the judicial bench, as others have since. We have a complicated history, which is to say our current dilemmas did not arrive overnight, nor will we be delivered from them quickly, and I share this today, on the eve of Independence Day, which ironically is a church holiday as well as a public one.

Historian Jon Meacham recounts a story about the inaugural session of the First Continental Congress in which a motion was made to begin the day with prayer. Jay and Rutledge vehemently opposed this, not because they thought prayer was a misplaced notion for the occasion; they opposed it because they wished not to endure a prayer from one who was not of their faith tradition. They were both Episcopalians. They were, in my estimation, bigots as well.

John Adams wrote of the incident in a letter to Abigail stating that his cousin Sam Adams moved that Jacob Duche, an Episcopal priest from Philadelphia in attendance, should lead the prayer, which he did in a manner that John Adams said “filled the bosom of every man present.”ⁱⁱ Religion and politics were intermingled that day, and less than two years later, Thomas Jefferson would ink the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence, imperfect as they may have been and still are in their application.

I’m reminded of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s famous saying: “Man’s (sic) capacity for justice makes democracy possible; man’s capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.” My friends, I fear our faith in democracy is being tested in our time; it is imperiled even. Our religious faith has something essential to say in this moment.

Some have suggested that Jefferson’s case for separation of church and state intended a separation of politics and religion. Meacham and other historians make a convincing argument that Jeffersonian thought was more nuanced than that, and that he never intended a political landscape devoid of religion. One’s religion informs one’s values, including one’s politics, or it’s not much of a religion at all, and Jefferson was much more interested in this nation being forged as a values-based society, even if he and the others imperfectly conceived of it. What was key, and remains key, is that we envision this nation as a pluralistic society made richer for the diversity. That is a value statement.

Values are fundamental to the psyche and identity of a person. They define who we are because they inform how we behave, and guide how we think. You do what you value. You become what you value. If you hold the value of honesty or integrity in high esteem, you will behave honestly and with integrity. If you don’t, you won’t. If vulnerability or humility are valued, you will act vulnerably and with humility. If not, you won’t.

Mahatma Gandhi had this to say about how values change the trajectory of life. He said:

“Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I want that for myself, for us,
for our nation.

The trick is that we often wish to have a certain value, but we don’t really. Wishing does not make it so. This values-based living requires regular self-reflection and a willingness to be honest with ourselves, and when we fall short, to make the turn, to repent and go a different way. (I will say this is just a high level take on this topic which I think at its heart is a spiritual matter, and I plan to teach a class this fall to dive into more detail.)^{iv}

By extrapolation, the same approach to values-based living applies to an institution, including this nation. This country was founded as a values-based society—again, albeit imperfectly. Part of the problem in today’s crises is that we’ve been unwilling to do the hard work of honest self-reflection and repentance as a nation. For most of our history we’ve fooled ourselves by stating the values, but they’ve been more wishing than reality. It’s hard work; it’s spiritual work. And

institutional inertia will always fight against it.

Let me offer this example: The nation’s motto, *e pluribus unum*, out of many one, is on every coin, every bill, every passport; it occurs on the seals of the President, Vice-President and Supreme Court. It is a value statement—out of many, one—but we should be clear what is meant by it and what is not meant by it.



The motto’s origin is traced back to 44 BCE, when Roman Senator and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote an essay to his son exhorting him to embrace ideals of public behavior—adopt values worthy of a civic leader. Cicero wrote this

to his son: “When each person loves the other as much as himself, it makes one out of many.”^{v vi}

Do you hear in the statement an echo of our collect for the day: “O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor... [that we may be] united to one another with pure affection...”

Love is a value that is largely missing in our public discourse, and perhaps in much of our lives. It is not an emotion or a feel-good; it is a core value that unifies, dignifies, honors the place of each person in the body politic.

Would that we were guided but such values rather than wishing for them!

Cicero wrote his essay nearly a century before Jesus began his ministry on earth, teaching a very similar value of loving neighbor as oneself. It was not a new concept, of course, (this loving neighbor as self is the unifying strength of our humanity, and of all major religions). In time, it would inform the founding documents of this nation as well.

But here we are, nearly 250 years on, and certain unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, are not yet the reality, and it feels like we are taking steps backward, as we have at other times in our history. So what are we to do?

Well, we must practice our values, habituate them, and let them speak into the public arena with grace and hope. Render to no one evil for evil. Let your religion inform your

politics. We must take the long view and insist that change is possible, that it will be hard-won, with the forces of institutional inertia striving to preserve or revert to a status quo that values stability more than union, tribal power more than unifying love of neighbor.

Gandhi said, when practiced, your values become your destiny. I believe that, and I am willing to work for it, in my life, in this cathedral community, and in this nation. I hope you are, too. This destiny is by no means manifest as a sure thing in this nation, but I believe it is possible, and on this eve of a national holiday, when we gather as followers of Christ who calls us to such work, may we have the grace and courage to do so peacefully and persistently, with love in our hearts.

ⁱ

https://www.google.com/search?q=declaration+of+independence&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjx-ZOa09X4AhWNLzQIHcmdAQYQ2-cCegQIABAA&oq=declaration+of+independence&gs_lcp=CgNpbWcQAziICAAQgAQQsQMMyBQgAEIAEMggIABCABBCxAzIFCAAQgAQyBQgAEIAEMgUIABCABDIFCAAQgAQyBQgAEIAEMgUIABCABDIFCAAQgAQ6BAgAEEM6CAGAELEDEIMBOgcIABCxAxBDOgsIABCABBCxAxCDAVCxDVioNmDiOGgAcAB4AIABdogBuBCSAQQyMS43mAEAoAEBqgELZ3dzLXdpei1pbWfAAQE&sclient=img&ei=kNa9YvHxOI3f0PEPybuGMA&bih=775&biw=1687&rlz=1C1CHZN_enUS941US941#imgsrc=w_BCPnOyXH6vAM

ⁱⁱ Meacham, Jon. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. New York: Random House. 2006. p. 64.

ⁱⁱⁱ As cited by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry,

<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-sermon-from-holding-on-to-hope-a-national-service-for-healing-and-wholeness/>, accessed June 29, 2022.

^{iv} <https://markmanson.net/personal-values>

^v <https://basketkace.com/2017/08/13/e-pluribus-unum/>

^{vi} The seal source:

https://www.google.com/search?q=e+pluribus+unum&rlz=1C1CHZN_enUS941US941&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi5q-690tX4AhW1KkQIHegqC0oQ_AUoAXoECAIQAw&biw=1687&bih=775&dpr=1.13#imgsrc=qpW2ME2OUJMAuM