

Building a Nation

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

A few days ago we celebrated our Independence Day. I thought you might enjoy these thoughts from an unknown author:

Only in America . . . can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance.

Only in America . . . do people order double cheeseburgers, a large fry, and a DIET coke.

Only in America . . . do banks leave vault doors open and then chain the pens to the counters.

Only in America . . . do we use answering machines to screen calls and then have call waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place.

Only in America . . . do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight.

The Hymnal Revision Committee of the United Methodist Church was preparing for the 1988 General Conference. This Conference would introduce a new hymnal for United Methodists. The committee was struggling over the words found in "**The Battle Hymn of the Republic**". They weren't struggling over The Battle Hymn's gender exclusive language, as you might think. They weren't struggling over its militaristic imagery. They weren't even struggling over its Civil War origin. They were struggling over the phrase, "As He died to make men holy, let us DIE to make men free."

They questioned, "Is freedom for others worth dying for?" An alternative phrase had come from Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians. They had recorded a popular version of the Battle Hymn with the "softer" lyrics of, "As He died to make men holy, let us LIVE to make men free."

It was Mr. Waring's version which was chosen by the committee to be presented to the General Conference. It was Mr. Waring's version that prevailed there as well. Now United Methodists were supposed to sing, "As He died to make men holy, let us LIVE to make men free."

But for reasons which are still unexplained, when the United Methodist hymnal was published in 1989, the original words were still there! United Methodists were still singing, "As He died to make men holy, let us DIE to make men free." No one knows how it happened.

As pastor Frank Lyman has said, **"It's the nearest mystery United Methodists have to the aliens of Roswell, New Mexico! In the end Julia Ward Howe won out over Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians."**

Perhaps that is for the best. I say that, even though living for a good cause is often more difficult than dying for it. But the original words cause us to ask, *Is There Anything in My Life Which I Value So Much That I Would Die For It?"*

As we reflect on our life as a people, we see the parallel between first century Palestine and our time. The Hebrews could look back to years of slavery when Moses went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go!" In reply Pharaoh did not say, "Sure, y'all go free; send me a post card from the Holy Land!" No, Pharaoh's troops went after the Hebrews. Even after they crossed the Red Sea, the children of Israel spent a generation and a half wandering in the wilderness. Even after they entered the Promised Land they struggled to possess it.

Americans celebrate July 4, 1776 as Independence Day. We shouldn't. We should call it our DECLARATION of Independence Day, for merely signing; quite literally, our John Hancock's on the declaration did not establish our independence. King George did not read the Declaration and then say to Thomas Jefferson, "Nice piece of writing Tom, y'all enjoy your USA, send me a postcard from Colonial Williamsburg." No, it took seven years of struggle before the Constitution could be written.

Have we forgotten the struggle involved in this noble experiment of democracy? Do we cherish this land or do we shy from a word like "patriotism" because it's been co-opted by the fanatic fringe? To be "patriotic" is not to be blind to our nation's sins. Like every nation, we have our weak points.

We love our country, but none of us believes it is perfect. And when America is in the wrong we need to speak up. Indeed, in a principled democracy, not to speak out against wrong would be a lack of patriotism. To be patriotic (from the Greek PATRIS which means fatherland) is to appreciate the sacrifice of our forefathers and foremothers who wanted this nation to be extraordinary. Many of them gave their lives that we might be free as a people, just as many people gave their lives that we

might have our Christian faith. Now it is our turn to maintain and to improve what they have passed on to us.

How shall we do that? How shall we maintain and improve that which we have been given?

First of All, We Need To Remember Where We Came From.

We like to think we came from the aristocracy of Europe. Well, a few Americans may have, but most Americans are descendants of those "huddled masses yearning to be free" that Emma Lazarus wrote about several generations ago. Her words are inscribed on our Statue of Liberty that stands proudly in the harbor of New York City to welcome millions of immigrants to America. In our lesson from the Gospel, Jesus says, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."***

Who can read those words without being reminded of the words that grace our Statue of Liberty?

"Give me your tired; you're poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

These words grew out of the history and heritage of a Jewish woman named Emma Lazarus. When France was about to present America with a statue called "Liberty Enlightening the World", and America was to provide the pedestal, Emma Lazarus was approached to contribute a poem. Emma Lazarus wrote the poem, but in October 1886, when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, she was gravely ill with cancer and did not attend. She died a year later at the age of 38. Her life was short, but her words live on, engraved in the concrete of a statue of acceptance.

Except for our Native American friends, we are a nation of immigrants. We trace our ancestry back to many kinds of people in many different lands. Maybe that is why it is our tradition as a nation to welcome the stranger with kindness and compassion. There are some in our land who would change all that. They would turn us into a fortress. That's understandable in light of the events of September 11th. Still, we need to be mindful of our history. We will maintain and improve that which has been handed to us, first of all, when we remember where we came from.

Second, We Need to Remember What We Stand For.

It has been said that if you stand for nothing you will fall for anything.

Growing up in the black ghetto of Baltimore, young Thurgood Marshall was an early, though unwilling, student of the U.S. Constitution. Often in mischief, he was required to stay after school as punishment for his classroom antics. For each infraction of a rule, Marshall was required to memorize a portion of the Constitution. As a result, Marshall reported, he soon knew the whole thing by heart. Marshall's primary school teachers would have been astonished if they could have foreseen that their unruly pupil would one day put that knowledge into practice as a distinguished attorney, and then as this nation's first African-American United States Supreme Court Justice.

Wouldn't it be great if every American child could know our Constitution by heart? How many of you can still recite the Preamble to the Constitution? Come try it with me:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

We are a people whose existence depends upon our sacred documents. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. As Christians we would add another sacred document--the Holy Bible—because every principle we hold dear as Americans was first established in God's Word. The words on the Statue of Liberty remind us where we came from. The words in our sacred documents tell us what we stand for.

The Third Thing We Need to Remember the Sacrifices that Have Been Made on Our Behalf.

This land is ours today because men and women have given their life's blood in our behalf. Many years ago Dick Abel came face-to-face with several prisoners of war in Vietnam. Abel was the first American these prisoners had seen after being held captive more than eight years. Some of the men Abel met had been in solitary confinement for four years! Later, Abel stood in awe as he heard the

leader of these POWs speak for the group in a message to the free world: "Thank you," said the leader on the group's behalf, "for the privilege of serving: God bless America!" This, from a group of men who were captives expressing their conviction that they were privileged to serve.

Don't think that there are no heroes left in this world. There are many men and women in this generation and in each generation over the past 200 plus years who have literally been willing to lay down their lives for this country. And we owe them a great debt. Part of what kept these men who were captives in Vietnam going was their faith in God. Abel tells about one of the captives, Robbie Risner, using a wood dowel to painstakingly wear a hole through an 8-inch concrete wall. He accomplished this excruciating task so that he could share his faith in Jesus Christ with the man in the next cell, a man who later died. Abel tells of the group singing, "Amazing Grace" even under the most horrid of conditions.

This is the stuff of which our commitment to freedom, justice and equality is made as Americans. Our faith helps us live out our commitment to freedom. Why? Because we understand that only in giving up some of our autonomy as individual citizens do we truly become free.

In Jesus' time, oxen were linked together by means of a wooden yoke across their necks that helped to evenly distribute the weight of a load so that both oxen carried it. Together, they were able to pull far greater a load than either one could pull by itself.

When we are yoked to Christ we are better able to stand up for the things we believe. When we are yoked to Christ, we are better able to repay the sacrifices made in our behalf. So, as we reflect on the meaning of Independence Day, we thank God and we thank those dedicated persons who made it possible for us to worship in freedom this day. And we are thankful that those words on our Statue of Liberty still remind us of the words of Jesus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . ." ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*** (Matt. 11: 28 NIV)

God Bless America!