

SERMON - THE 5th SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY - 04 JULY 2010
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

My friends, my sermon today is going to be short on biblical exegesis, and long on the exegesis of words of non-biblical others. On this day in which we honor the birthday of our wonderful country, I have chosen to play the role of "editor" so to speak; to spend my effort tying together in a hopefully coherent fashion the words of some other people who can speak much more eloquently than I on a subject of great importance to the future of this country.

The liturgical propers for July 4, Independence Day, were introduced with the 1928 revision of the Book of Common Prayer. The Collect was written by Bishop Edward Lambe Parsons of California specifically for the 1928 revision. The Epistle selection taken from Deut. X, 17-21 is admirably applicable for this day as it reminds us, as it did ancient Israel, that the mighty God who has "Given us this good land for our heritage" as we will shortly pray, will judge us on the basis of our stewardship of his gift at some point in the future. There is a distinct parallel between the mention of Israel, who for many years was a sojourner and a stranger in foreign lands before settling in the land of Canaan, and the peoples from distant lands who have settled and built up our own country. Like the Epistle, the Gospel places before us the loftiest ideals for our national life as expressed in and through our political and social institutions and activity. Love of enemies is difficult for both nations and individuals, yet it is only through conscious and deliberate efforts at reconciling differences and helping the less fortunate among the peoples of the world that our country can lead the nations and races of men to a just and lasting peace.

The propers recognize and honor the birthday of the United States of America, specifically the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence, a statement adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776 announcing that the Thirteen Colonies then at war with Great Britain were no longer a part of the British Empire. Written primarily by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration is a formal explanation of why Congress had voted on July 2 to declare independence from Great Britain, more than a year after the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War.

As a refresher for all of us, and a reminder of the Christian background behind the document and the people who signed it, let me read for you a couple of the key paragraphs:

"When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

“We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as free and independent states, they have full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

Inspiring words, are they not, and equally inspiring are the accomplishments that have followed the initial utterance of those words. Today, the United States of America stands alone as the supreme power on earth. In a little over two and a third centuries, a nation born on the ideals of liberty, responsibility, Godliness, and the freedom to become what God intended us to become has become the greatest civilization on earth. The ideal of freedom that our founding fathers believed valuable enough to risk their lives, fortunes, families, and sacred honor for, has in fact been the basis for the development of the most advanced and compassionate society the earth has known.

As evidenced by the words of that Declaration, I submit to you that the basic underpinning of this accomplishment has been the belief in a Supreme Being, and a concurrent belief in a moral standard of conduct established by that Being that controls the exercise of individual power and liberty. I also submit to you that that underpinning is under attack and losing ground everywhere you look in the United States today, and that if not corrected, will be the basis for the gradual decline of our great country, as every other great nation has ultimately experienced. I finally submit that this deterioration can be reversed, albeit at significant cost and effort. Walk with me for the next few minutes as we review the words of some people who can much more eloquently than I detail the assertions that I have just made.

Will Durant, the well known historian and commentator, once said this: “In back of every great civilization, behind all the might and wealth, is something powerful... something it believes in. No nation can achieve greatness unless it believes in something~, and that something must have the moral dimensions required to sustain a great civilization.”

What is the moral dimension which sets us apart as a nation and has led us in the past? Listen to what French writer Alexis de Tocqueville said, after visiting America in 1831; “I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!” - [Alexis de Tocqueville](#).

My friends, in my opinion, America is walking away from being good, and at an increasingly rapid pace. This is happening because much of America is walking away from the belief in something greater than themselves and in a standard of conduct that focuses on others rather than themselves. In short, America is walking away from God. Listen to what Georgia

Anne Geyer – a noted journalist and foreign correspondent who has interviewed a broad range of world newsmakers has to say: “It is impossible to have a moral community or nation without faith in God, because without it everything rapidly comes down to "me," and "me" alone is meaningless. Today Americans have stopped acting in terms of their own moral, ethical and religious beliefs and principles. They've stopped acting on what they knew was right -- and the "me" has become the measure of everything. However, moral societies are the only ones that work. If anyone thinks there is not a direct and invaluable relationship between personal integrity in a society and that society's prosperity, that person has simply not studied history. And this should not surprise us. Great moral societies, built upon faith in God, honor, trust, and the law blossom because they are harmonious; because people love or at least respect their fellowman; because, finally, they have a common belief in something beyond themselves. It simplifies life immensely; you do not waste and spend your days fighting for turf, for privilege, for money and power over your fellowman. - [Georgia Anne Geyer, *Bits & Pieces*, September 17, 1992, pp. 23-24.](#)

Yes, as a country we are walking away from religion, and where can it be seen most clearly? In the youth of our nation. Look around you in almost any church; do you see a lot of children and young people? Even in those churches where there is a decent representation of young people, where are the teenagers and young adults – at a time in their life when they are learning to fit into society and take up their role of moving society forward? You don't find them in churches for the most part. And those that you do find in church tend to be in churches where the show rather than the content is what attracts and keeps them.

In 1993, William J. Bennett – a conservative pundit, politician and political theorist better known as the “Drug Czar” under President George H. W. Bush compiled the Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, a statistical portrait of American behavioral trends from 1960 - 1990. Among the findings: since 1960, while the gross domestic product nearly tripled, violent crime increased 560%; divorces more than doubled; the percentage of children in single-parent homes tripled; and by the end of the decade 40% of all American births and 80% of minority births occurred out of wedlock. In 1940 teachers identified the top problems in America's schools as: Talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise and running in the hall. In 1990, teachers listed drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, suicide, rape and assault as the top issues.

There is a coarseness, a callousness and a cynicism to our era. And the worst of it has to do with those least able to understand and deal with it, our children. Our culture seems almost dedicated to the corruption of the young. Children are replacing self-control with self-indulgence and self-expression, and their parents are allowing them to do so. Our kids spend their time in front of television or movies or game pods dealing with fantasies rather than realities. While their minds vegetate, so do their bodies, and an epidemic of obesity results.

And where is this all taking us? When the novelist Walker Percy was asked what concerned him most about America's future, he answered, "Probably the fear of seeing America, with all its great strength and beauty and freedom...gradually subside into decay through default and be defeated ~ from within, from weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed and in the end helplessness before its great problems."

How do we turn the tide? Here is what William Bennett had to say: “I submit that only when we turn to the right things--enduring, noble, spiritual things--will life get better. Most important, we must return religion to its proper place. Religion provides us with moral bearings, and the solution to our chief problem of spiritual impoverishment depends on spiritual renewal. Today, much of society ridicules and mocks those who are serious about

their faith. America's only respectable form of bigotry is bigotry against religious people. And the only reason for hatred of religion is that it forces us to confront matters many would prefer to ignore. Today we must carry on a new struggle for the country we love. We must push hard against an age that is pushing hard against us. If we have full employment and greater economic growth--if we have cities of gold and alabaster--but our children have not learned how to walk in goodness, justice and mercy, then the American experiment, no matter how gilded, will have failed. Do not surrender. Get mad. Get in the fight.” - [Excerpts from *What Really Ails America*, condensed from a speech by William J. Bennett, delivered December 7, 1993 at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., reprinted in *Reader's Digest*, April, 1994.](#)

Yes, my friends, we must get involved. We must get mad, and we must get in the fight. As indicated in The Declaration of Independence that we honor today, this country was founded on Christian principles and beliefs. While it has made a distinct separation between church and state to prevent religious persecution, it cannot let that separation move it away from what made us strong to begin with. Our system of governance depends upon the exercise of self-restraint and respect for others in order to succeed. Christian religious belief and practice offers the model where those beliefs can be developed and honed. Where that development and honing is most needed is with our nation's youth, who bear the responsibility for taking forward what has been brought to them by previous generations. We, specifically including those “grey hairs” of us who tend to fill today's church pews, need to find ways to resist the efforts of those that would purge religion from our national scene, to reinsert religion into our daily life and activities, and to find and energize the younger generations with an understanding of religious beliefs and how they are applied to everyday activity and decisions. I know it is not easy; the older generations of American people have been through a lot, and we are tired and ready to turn over the mantle of leadership to others. But you know something; if we are capable of loading down future generations with debts and responsibilities that are enormous, as we have been doing for the last two years, the least we can do is try to equip them with a set of values and a moral compass that will help them deal with what they inherit. The signers of The Declaration of Independence “with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence”, mutually pledged to each other their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to support the start of this great nation. Returning it to greatness will take no less.

May God bless us all, and may God bless America. *Amen.*