

Sermon 070410 Independence Day
Scripture- Hebrews 11: 10-16
Sermon Title- City on a Hill

On Wednesday, our nation celebrates our independence that took place on this date 242 years ago. We participate in the chard meat fest followed by colorful bombs bursting in air. Meg and I will be heading up to Boothbay Harbor, ME for a few days. I hope you have plans, too.

My personal family history on the Irish side is poorly researched and contains possible myth that has made me uncomfortable when I listen to the issues around illegal immigration. The spelling of my last name, C-O-N-L-E-Y, is American, not Irish. Whoever my ancestor was that came over (we're pretty sure it was during the Irish potato famine in the mid 1800's) changed the spelling, or it was changed upon arrival. The spelling was likely C-O-N-N-O-L-L-Y, but we don't know. There is a story; I view it as a family myth, told to me by an uncle that had my ancestor jumping ship in Boston harbor in order to avoid being processed by immigration. The name change indicates that the myth could be true. This would make me a descendant of an illegal immigrant. This makes me more tolerant than many on the illegal immigration issue.

Long before my Irish ancestors arrived here, others came carrying the Bible with them. Make no mistake; the Bible is as much a founding document for the United States as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Let me be clear here: I am not suggesting that the

United States is or should be a Christian nation. It is not and I believe it should stay that way. In this country, we are free to worship as we please. Beyond our American flag here which represents our freedom to worship as we please, I do not want the government insinuating itself into this church in any way. By the way, anyone who thinks that there is no prayer in schools forgets what happens at exam time.

The early European colonists who came here for religious, rather than economic reasons, were inspired in particular by one Bible passage, the passage we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning. This is the image of the City of God. Although the Hebrews passage is clearly speaking of an otherworldly city, the Puritans believed that their community would be the New Jerusalem, and become the beacon of Gospel light that would usher in the reign of God. I am referring to Governor John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Mass Bay Colony who spoke famously of the, ‘shining city on the hill.’ This is how Beacon Hill in Boston got its name.

Ronald Reagan used this image in his famous speech that he repeated throughout his life where he called, “America- the shining city on the hill.” I do not care what your political persuasion. You could not be American and listen to that speech without the short ones on the back of your neck standing up. That speech, rooted in Scripture, still holds us because we think of ourselves as a beacon in the world of nations. Throughout our history, we have been the beacon of freedom, liberty,

and opportunity. We are the land of the brave and the home of the free. This remains the nation where so many people have hoped to get to for economic freedom, religious freedom, freedom of speech, assembly and so on. It is our fervent prayer on this day, the day celebrating our nation's birth, that America will always remain just that.

When the founding fathers did their work, they set a marvelous example of freedom, but it was freedom within the limits of their time. We know that by standards of our time, the Constitution was greatly flawed. Freedom and opportunity were denied to people of color and to women. One of the great strengths of our nation is that freedom and opportunity have opened for more and more of our citizens. The beacon of freedom has gotten brighter, thank God, from our city on the hill.

The dream of a better future has always been part and parcel of the American ideal. We are moving forward, getting better. John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" to capture a spirit of America moving forward. As Americans, we are called to proclaim a world better than the one we know, and to work hard not only to make it real, but also to inspire our children with its promise and with the zeal to fulfill it.

Wednesday, we wave our flag of freedom, liberty, and independence proudly. Freedom is what we are all about. But I believe that we celebrate freedom vociferously and forget too quickly that which

is essential if freedom is going to work and survive. We forget too quickly that with freedom comes responsibility.

I apologize if what I am about to say is difficult for you to hear. I am, frankly, worried about our country and about our future. It appears to me that the freedom most exercised in our country these days is the freedom to hate. Hate is an ugly word but I believe it is apt. Our public debates have dissolved into shouting matches in which nothing is heard and nothing is learned. We don't call each other wrong anymore... we call each other bad and evil. Our view of Americans that disagree with us or are different from us has been reduced to mistrust, disdain, contempt, and suspicion. Democrats are convinced that Republicans are ruining the country. Republicans are convinced that it's too late for that because the Democrats already ruined the country before the Republicans got in, and the Republicans are repairing the damage. Some people don't want to pay taxes because they don't want their hard-earned money to go to poor people who they suspect are lazy. Some people don't like paying taxes because they fear their taxes will fund American military adventurism. Media outlets are considered evil, unless it's a media outlet of one's own choice. Conservatives see themselves as the true Americans, standing up for the American flag, lower taxes, and small government. Liberals see themselves as the true Americans, standing up for tolerance and diversity. We've made politics, which is by nature messy, a battleground for recriminations

instead of an institutional opportunity to work together. We have isolated ourselves from our countrymen by focusing on what divides us instead of what unites us.

Racism and bigotry are still rampant in this country. Somehow it had become more overt lately. We have become a nation of suspicious people. Everyone is under suspicion- business, labor, elected officials, the military, government at all levels, the courts, the police, the schools, the churches, the clergy, the doctors, the scientists, ecologists, the bankers, rich people, poor people, gun lovers, people who hate guns, pro-lifers, pro-choicers, Muslims, Jews, Christians, atheists, and pretty much any group you want to name. We are mistrustful of anyone who is not us. Can all those people be so bad? Is it possible that they are doing their best and trying to do the right thing and that we should be thankful for them?

When I first visited Paris, France back in the 1980's I had a good friend, Michael Teasdale, who was living in Paris. When I arrived, I told Michael that I had heard many times that Parisians don't like Americans. Michael laughed and said that it is true that Parisians don't like Americans. He then went on to say that Parisians don't like Germans either, or Italians, or Brits. He said that Parisians don't even like other Parisians.

I think Americans have become like Parisians. We don't like anyone that's not us, including and in some cases especially our own

countrymen. Friends, what happened to the phrase, “One nation under God?” I would have preferred to never quote this man in my life but I will here. Nikita Khrushchev said famously that America would destroy itself from within. I pray to God that he was wrong, but I fear that he will be shown to be prophetic. By the way, the Soviet Union, which Khrushchev headed, is gone. All the great empires including, of course, the Roman Empire are gone, except one. I fear that if we continue on this path of acrimony, mistrust, suspicion, disdain, contempt, and yes, hate of other Americans, we will destroy ourselves from within. We have no guarantees that this great nation will continue on. It is time to stop assuming that our nation will always be here and start taking responsibility to make sure it will be here for our children and grandchildren.

It is on us. We got us into this mess and our only chance to get out of it is if we relearn and take to heart the phrase, “One nation under God.” Freedom is our birthright. Responsibility should be our oath. Let us take responsibility to treat each other with respect, even when we disagree. Let us be responsible citizens... not just willing, but eager to work together to solve our many problems. Let us take responsibility for the great legacy that has been handed down to us by our forbearers. Let us take responsibility for this great nation that celebrates its 242 birthday on Wednesday.

Governor John Winthrop envisioned a world that was better than the one he knew when he used scripture to envision the ‘shining city on the hill.’ It is not too late for us to dream the same dream for our country and to set ourselves to making it come true. Imagine a country in which brotherhood is foundational. Imagine a country in which we can disagree without being disagreeable. Imagine a country in which we listen and work cooperatively. Imagine a country, which is both great and good. Imagine a country in which we are, “One nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” After Communion, we will sing one of our great national songs. I would like to end by reciting to you the fourth verse of it. Listen, with your heart, to the last verse of America, The Beautiful:

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years

Thine alabaster cities, undimmed by human tears.

America! America!

God shed his grace on the,

And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

God Bless America. AMEN