

The Anniversary of America's Independence
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
5 July 2020

Matthew 11:16-30

I love real life documentaries and other television programs about how Americans lead their lives. Many of you who read the book or saw the documentary by Peter Jenkins, "Walk Across America," (made about ten years ago,) know what I am talking about. In place after place, Jenkins discovered that what most defines average Americans is not so much our rugged individualism, as many have written about. It is not our problems, our internal struggles, our fears, or our prejudices. What defines most Americans is our inventiveness, our resourcefulness, our generosity, and our hope. In fact after a visit to America in 1831 French writer Alexis de Toqueville said, "America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!"

We are known around the globe for the might of our military, for the excellence of our entertainment industry, for the greatness of our Constitution and government, and for our economy. The world calls us a land of dreams. They love our clothing and our music. They can not have enough of our movies and television. Many dream of coming to our shores and ports, to enter this great nation of immigrants to make a life for themselves and their families. Many around the globe look at us with longing in their eyes and hope in their hearts. And even though our current troubles have cast a very negative image of our nation around the world, many still believe that as long as America remains strong there will be hope for them and for the world.

But, my friends, as we celebrate another anniversary of our independence, we must turn to the words of Matthew and heed the evangelist's warnings for. Now, you will not find these warnings in the passage given to us by our Lectionary. Our Lectionary has left these warnings out for reasons I don't quite understand. Let me tell you what I mean. Our passage for today comes from the 11 chapter of Matthew, beginning at the 16th verse. Jesus has just ended a speech about John the Baptist. Then he asks a question to the crowds in connection with that speech, "To what will I compare this generation?" They are like children playing two pretend games in Jesus day: Wedding or Funeral.

In "wedding" the pretend game leads the children to singing and dancing. In Funeral the dirges lead them to pretend mourning and wailing. Then Jesus says "John the Baptist came asking all of you to die to sin through repentance (a reference to the

“funeral” game) and you criticized him, calling him crazy or demon-possessed, because he isolated himself from you and did not participate in social conventions.” Jesus himself participates in drinking and merrymaking, eating with sinners (Reference to the “wedding” game) and “you call me a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of sinners.” The reason why the crowds will not accept either John or Jesus is not their behavior around drinking or eating. This is just an excuse! The real reason why the crowds dismiss both of them is because of their call to repentance. Both of them call the crowds to die to self, to repent of their sins, to place their hope in God, and to seek forgiveness.

Right after this reference to children’s games, Jesus moves into a section of warnings. This is the passage not given to us today. It begins at verse 20 and it ends at verse 24. It reads as follows:

Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.’

I believe these warnings are important for us as Americans today. We could very well translate this warnings to our context. The Lord has done great deeds of power in our midst. He has blessed America in amazing and powerful ways. This is truly the land of promise, a land rich with milk and honey. Yet, sadly, repentance for our misdoings and our failures is seldom seen in our nation. In fact, Christ and his message has become so politicized that we all claim to have him on our side, regardless of the lack of nexus between our words and our lifestyles. In the mean time, the Biblical God continues to be pushed out of the market place more and more everyday. God is pushed out of Wall Street and out of Main Street. We push God out of our courthouses and our schools. We push God out of our civil life, and relegate him only to our private life, even though we still call ourselves “One Nation Under God.” We boldly declare that our unity is rooted in God, yet we behave as though God is utterly irrelevant to our public discourse and our public life. In fact, we use the word “God” to sound pious and relatable, but our personal lives do not reflect the values of a person who believes in God.

My friends, we can not push God out of our lives without welcoming selfish-individualism and misguided patriotism to take God’s place. We can not push God out without welcoming hopelessness into our lives. The greatest threat this nation faces is not terrorism but the hopelessness that springs from our distancing from God. Without

God our union is in peril and we are left quite alone to face our own despair and our own lack of direction. 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, not by the communist movement (terrorist movement), but from within, from weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed and in the end helplessness before its great problems. [Parenthesis mine] (www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/a/america.htm).

My friends, many believe that it is unpatriotic to criticize America and to call it to repentance. I don't believe this is true. In fact, I believe that, as we celebrate everything that is good about our nation, we must also call attention to the things of which we need to repent. Sadly, our need for repentance has been shown on television stations all across our nation these last few weeks. We continue to treat each other with great inhumanity, we have allowed our consumerism to drive us away from God. We have become infatuated with our progress and have forgotten about the giver of all blessings. We pride in our liberty and our freedom, while we push out of our lives the giver of all freedom and all liberty, or we capriciously use his name for political gain, but fail to live up to his commands in our personal lives. We must repent and return to the Lord. We must re-center. We must open our eyes and see how incredibly blessed we are and how grateful we must be to God.

Now, when I call all of us to remember that we are a nation under God, I don't give God a name, a denomination, or a specific people group. I believe in religious freedom, while acknowledging that for me, and I pray for all of you, all of God's blessings come through his Son, Jesus Christ. I am a Christian trying hard to live in accordance to a Christian worldview.

As a Christian, I have a few dreams today. I dream of a day when America will be recognized as much for the depth of our faith, varied and beautiful, as we are recognized for our technology. I long for the day when the world will marvel at our goodness as much as they marvel at our military might. I long for the day when God will in fact become the root and foundation of our unity as a nation. Because if God is our father and mother, then all of us are brothers and sisters. And if this is the case, the freedom, advancement, and well-being of all our neighbors is my responsibility, your responsibility, our communal responsibility. I long for the day when we will relate to one another as brothers and sisters and our mutual love will become more famous around the globe than our Hollywood movies and our Broadway musicals. I long for the day when God will be welcomed back into Market Street, Wall Street, and Main Street. These are my hopes for America on her Birthday. I invite you to hope with me. I invite you to dream with me. I invite you to pray with me for this great nation we all love. Amen!

Let us Pray,

A Prayer For Sound Government (BCP, page 821)

O Lord our Governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth. To the President and members of the Cabinet, Governors of States, Mayors of Cities, and to all in administrative authority, grant wisdom and grace in the exercise of their duties. To Senators and Representatives, and those who make our laws in States, Cities, and Towns, give courage, wisdom, and foresight to provide for the needs of all our people, and to fulfill our obligations in the community of nations. To the Judges and officers of our Courts give understanding and integrity, that human rights may be safeguarded and justice served. And finally, teach our people to rely on your strength and to accept their responsibilities to their fellow citizens, that they may elect trustworthy leaders and make wise decisions for the well being of our society; that we may serve you faithfully in our generation and honor your holy Name. For yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Amen.