



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
July 1, 2018 Sermon

In Ordinary Time God is With Us: What Do We Do With Our Freedom?

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 7:14-16, Galatians 5:1, 13-15

The only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together . . . We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people . . . For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.—*A Model of Christian Charity*, a sermon preached by John Winthrop, on board the *Arabella* as it set sail for New England, 1630.

[T]he "shining city upon a hill"—the phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. I've spoken of the shining city all my political life . . . in my mind it was a tall, proud city . . . God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace . . . And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.—Ronald Reagan, Farewell Speech to the Nation, 1989

First Scripture Lesson:

We have a dream—an American dream. We dream of a city on a hill.

That image, that metaphor, that vision of a city on a hill runs through our country's history like a golden thread. John Winthrop, who would become governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, first sounds it while preaching a sermon on board the ship, *Arabella*, which was one of a flotilla of ships, called the Winthrop Fleet, sailing, bringing immigrants—mostly Puritans from England—to America in the year 1630

In our lifetimes, the image was made famous by Ronald Reagan, and has been invoked by presidents (George W. Bush, Barack Obama) and other political figures (Mitt Romney, James Comey) ever since. Anytime a phrase gains that kind of currency, it's always interesting to go back to the source, which (no surprise) is the Bible, in particular, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is preaching to his followers and would-be-followers. Listen now for God's Word, reading from Matthew chapter 7 verses 14-16 . . .

Second Scripture Lesson:

Part of that American dream, a large part of that vision of a city on a hill, has always been liberty, freedom. Again, this goes back to the beginning of our country—the Fourth of July is, after all, also known as Independence Day. And again, the very idea of freedom has deep roots in the Bible. For our Second Scripture Lesson, I'll read from a chapter in the that sounds the theme explicitly, Galatians chapter 5, reading verses 1 and 13-15. Listen now for God's Word . . .

Sermon:

We have a dream—an American dream. We dream of a city on a hill.

Still. Even now. Maybe even more so now.

And it hasn't just been preachers, presidents, and politicians sounding this dream—our poets, and our visionaries have too.

I know, I know, it's so predictable that I would say this: I grew up *when* I grew up, and I grew up *where* I grew up, that is *in* New Jersey, but it's still true: Bruce Springsteen *is* a great American poet and visionary. Listen to some—almost any—of his songs. They're not just about fast cars, rock and roll, and summers down the shore. There's even one

called *The Promised Land*:
Mister, I ain't a boy, no, I'm a man, and I believe in the promised land.

But even a song called *Racing in the Streets* has this:
*For all the shut down strangers and hot rod angels,
Rumbling through this promised land
Tonight my baby and me, we're gonna ride to the sea
And wash these sins off our hands.*

Oh, man, even now, all these years later, even here, in Dayton, Ohio, I can still smell the surf, hear the barkers on the Boardwalk; let me tell youse guys, dis sermon today?—it's coming to ya from NEEWWWWW Jersey.

The promised land? It's out there . . . somewhere . . . on Highway nine: *Chrome wheeled, fuel injected and steppin' out over the line.*

Now, you don't have to tell me, I know, I *know*: a lot of Bruce's songs are about *leaving*—about running away *from*—New Jersey. Believe me, I *know*. I have college friends who, to this day, never tire of telling me that. But fifteen years after he wrote that one song, his most famous runaway song, *Born to Run*, Springsteen is standing alone, on stage; he's going acoustic, (you can find it on YouTube). But before he starts to sing the song, he says this:

"I guess when I wrote this song, I thought I was writing about a guy and a girl who wanted to run and keep on running, and never come back [the crowd cheers—now they *know* what song's coming]." But Springsteen keeps talking: "And that was a nice, romantic idea." [here, he pauses]

We have a dream.

And then he goes on:

"But I realized that, after I put *all* those people in *all* those cars, I was going to have to figure out someplace for 'em to go [here he pauses again, and cracks this wry, self-deprecating smile]."

An American dream. But he's still not ready to sing.

"And I realized, in the end, I guess, that individual freedom—when it's not connected to some sort of community or friends or the world outside—ends up feeling pretty meaningless. So I guess that guy and that girl were out there looking for connection. And I guess that's what I'm doin' here tonight. So this is a song about two people trying to find their way home."

And only *then* does he start to sing the song:
In the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream.

And 18,000 people begin to sing it with him—every word.

We dream of a city on a hill.

Connection. John Winthrop, the Puritan preacher, makes the same point: *For this end, we must be knit together . . . We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.*

But that's not easy. It's not easy for people in general, and it's especially not easy for a people who don't share a common ethnicity, who don't trace their being a people back to the beginning of time, the way most peoples in the world have, and many still do.

"What will hold the American people together?" That was the question asked from the very first, and it's been answered, through the years, in all kinds of ways. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who came over to America in the

1830's to observe democracy in America (and he wrote a book called just that) said that, for all their individualism, Americans were the *joiningest* people in the world.

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds," he wrote, "constantly unite."

And then he added:

"Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small . . . In America I encountered sorts of associations of which, I confess, I had no idea, and I often admired the *infinite* art with which the inhabitants of the United States managed to fix a common goal to the efforts of many people and to get them to advance it freely.

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite"? . . . *hmmm* . . . "with many many people joining together to artfully fix a common goal and advance it together freely"? *Hmmm* . . . You have to wonder: What would Tocqueville say about democracy in America today?

There's no doubt that our participation in civic associations has fallen off. The data show this. Many of us—most, I would guess—are members of fewer civic clubs and organizations—Kiwanis, Shriners, Rotary, the NAACP, the League of Women Voters, the PTA, the VFW and the VVA, bowling and softball leagues, etc.—than our parents, and far fewer than our grandparents. Lots of exceptions, of course, but still . . .

And yet it goes deeper. That American joiningness was driven by an impulse that can only be called religious. "Religious" in the root sense of that word, meaning to bind together (the same root as in the word, "ligament") Yes, certainly, there has always been, in America, a deep, burning desire for freedom—freedom to live our own lives, to be our own people, without arbitrary external constraints, free from the past, free to live by our own lights, freedom to, among many other things, worship God where and how we choose, or not at all.

But there was also this conviction—often unstated and implicit, but still there—that freedom does not preclude community and connection with others but necessarily includes it.

And historically, that conviction comes from the Bible: it's a *city* on a hill, not a single person. Standing on that hilltop, Jesus called into existence a people, a community of believers, not just a collection of individuals.

So, now, would be a good time for a couple caveats:

Caveat#1: I'm not saying the United States was or was not, is or is not, should or should not be, a Christian nation. That's a complex historical question, the answer to which depends on how you define your terms. No doubt, that those who founded the United States did not want—in fact, forbade—an official state religion of the US, Christianity or otherwise. Also, no doubt, that the life of America, for nearly 400 years now, has been to some extent, to a large extent, informed by Christianity and the Bible. Leave that there for now.

Caveat#2: this sense—this sense that the United States has a special, unique, singular, calling from God to be a light to the nations—has been abused—badly abused. It's been used to justify the worst wrongdoing—to give our country a free pass, to say what we're doing must be right, and don't you dare question it, because, hey, we're doing it.

Paul writes this:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.

Self-indulgence can take many forms—in words, in actions—on social media, for example, when we bite and devour one another, and risk being consumed by one another. That's one form of self-indulgence.

But ultimately, self-indulgence comes down to license: I can do, I can say, whatever I want, because, hey, I'm doing it and I'm saying it. But here's the paradox: whatever power I may have, power over others—commanding, controlling them, their attention, actions, and admiration—whatever power I may have, *if I lack power over myself*, and such power over myself can come only from a power higher than myself and my acknowledging that in some way, if I lack that power over myself, then, whatever power I may have over others, I am truly without power myself. I am nothing more than a slave to the worst passions of the moment. You don't have to look far to see this.

Again the Apostle Paul:

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want, is what I do. I want to do what is good, but evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, but I see in me another law, at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the sin that dwells in me.

That's Paul describing *our* fallen human condition. And what he means is this:

Freedom is a gift, a good gift from God. But both as individuals and collectively, we inherit it as a damaged good. It's *still* good, but it is damaged. Its very use can result in unfreedom. You can make one free decision once—and then end up paying for it—with your freedom greatly restricted—for a long, long time. And because the human misuse of freedom has resulted in unfreedom, we inherit it in just that damaged state.

That's the doctrine of original sin, and again, you don't have to look far to see it, both individually and collectively: You take the good with the bad.

For example, as Americans, we inherit many great, good things: respect for human rights and civil liberties, the institutions and restraints of self-government, a civic *and* entrepreneurial spirit, abundant and spectacular natural resources and tremendous industry and innovation. Yet, we also inherit all the ways those good things have been damaged: the denial of human and civil rights, corrupt attempts to undermine and override the institutions and restraints of self-government, selfishness and greed, environmental degradation and mindless, over-reaching pride. We inherit a world of problems not entirely of our own making, but still our responsibility.

And so the question: what do we do with our freedom?

What's remarkable—what should make us grateful to God, I think—is how much good Americans *have* done with their freedom, however limited it may have been. To cite only one, but perhaps the most dramatic, example: Even those who came here in the worst unfreedom—on the middle passage in the holds of slave ships—even they, especially they, and all those who took up their cause, dreamed of, lived for, strove for, something better. Their masters' Bible became their Bible, especially the story of Moses leading his people, an enslaved people, leading them as God's people, to a land of freedom.

Mister, I ain't a boy, no, I'm a man, and I believe in the promised land.

All of which of course reminds us that our present time is by no means the only time this country has been threatened by distrust, disunity and division. And our present time is by no means the worst such time—at least not yet. So it's good to remember, especially as Independence Day approaches, that this nation, under God, has, in the past, had, in the words of our 16th president, a rebirth of freedom.

And in that rebirth of freedom, our nation's vision has been informed by that vision of a city on a hill. We cannot—we must not—*identify* our nation as that city. That would be to lapse back into that abuse, that misuse of our freedom, that self-indulgence and its accompanying license, that we have suffered in the past and at times still suffer today.

But our vision of our nation must be *informed* by—*challenged* by—that vision of a city on a hill: a light to all nations, a city (in the words of our fortieth president) "open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here," a city (in the words of John Winthrop again) where "we must be knit together . . . delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace," a city, where (in the words of another great American poet and visionary, Huckleberry Finn) "what you want, *above all things* . . . is for *everybody* to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others."

That's what we must do with our freedom.

We have a dream—an American dream.

We dream of a city on a hill.

Still. Even now. Maybe even more so now.

In ordinary time, God is with us: For freedom, Christ has set us free.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.