



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
January 20, 2019 Sermon

American Exceptionalism?

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 5:13-16

That's what it means to love America. That's what it means to believe in America. That's what it means when we say America is exceptional. For we were born of change. . . . That's why we argue and fight with so much passion and conviction, because we know our efforts matter. We know America is what we make of it.

Fifty years from Bloody Sunday, our march is not yet finished. . . . Two hundred and thirty-nine years after this nation's founding, our union is not yet perfect. But we are getting closer. Our job's easier because somebody already got us over that bridge. When it feels the road's too hard, we will remember these early travelers, and draw strength from their example, and hold firmly the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint."

We honor those who walked so we could run. We must run so our children soar. And we will not grow weary. For we believe in the power of an awesome God, and we believe in this country's sacred promise.—Barrack Obama, March 7, 2015, from a speech delivered at Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma Alabama to mark the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches.

First Scripture Lesson

The People are complaining. Again. This is just too hard. What we've been called to do—to be God's people, to live as God called us to live—it's just too hard. The vexations, the weariness and the anxieties, the burden of it all.

Through the prophet, Isaiah, God answers them. yes, this would all be true, if you were on your own. But: Have you not known? have you not heard?—God is with you. Listen now for God's Word, Isaiah 40:27-41:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.

Second Scripture Lesson:

Our words are like our children: we give them life, we love them, we are so proud of them, but they aren't really ours: they have lives of their own. And sometimes their lives—or in the case of our words, the meanings they acquire—surprise us, astound us, go far beyond our wildest imaginings.

In fact, sometimes, it's our children who do this to our words. I can't be the only parent who's heard his own words quoted back to him by his children in ways he never expected, with meanings he never intended, never dreamed of.

"You always said Dad, that I should think for myself."

"Yeah, but I was talking about your friends, not me."

Every parent who has ever parented, every teacher who has ever taught, every preacher who has ever preached, anyone who has ever offered words of command, exhortation, encouragement, instruction, advice, reflection, solemn promise, playful whimsy or even everyday mundane, time-passing observation, knows this. Anyone who has ever *spoken* a word at all knows this. Anyone who has ever *written* a word at all—taken chisel to stone, stylus to wax, quill to parchment, pen to paper, or fingertips to keyboard—knows this. Our words have lives of their own.

Which makes me wonder about the Word of God, especially those words that Jesus said during his earthly ministry. Would the lives they gone on to have, the meanings they have since acquired—and their number is legion—would they have surprised or even astounded Jesus? Today's second Scripture Lesson is a case in point. It's from the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus is speaking to his followers, telling them what it means to be his followers. They are a unique group with a unique identity and destiny, a special calling from God. Yet these words have been applied not just to first-century Palestinians sitting at Jesus' feet, but also to our own country, the United States of America. Listen now for God's Word, and you'll see:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Sermon

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised: when I googled something I kinda sorta remembered from my American history class I discovered it was being kicked around like a football in our contemporary culture "wars," a phrase which, to be honest, I'd rather not use.

"No second lieutenant," ex-Buffalo Bills football coach Marv Levy once observed, "ever shouted to his platoon, 'Men, this is football!'" Levy's point being that, when we liken things to war that are not war, we risk forgetting the horrors of real war and therefore are more likely to get ourselves into one.

Anyway, back to our contemporary culture war—er, cultural disagreements. What I remembered from my American history class was the whole idea of "*American exceptionalism*." American exceptionalism meaning that America is not just one nation among many, but a special nation, an exceptional one, with a special destiny—rising above the fret and fray of human history to be a light to all nations, a beacon of freedom to all peoples, a nation with a clear, God-given, manifest destiny, a divine calling, if you will, to be . . . well, to be a shining city on a hill.

That phrase—a city on a hill—was first applied to America in 1630 by the Reverend John Winthrop as he preached to his little band of Calvinist-Puritan refugees in the ship, *The Arabella*, anchored in the Bay of Massachusetts Harbor. He said that their little settlement would be "a city on a hill." And the phrase has been applied to this country ever since, by preachers and politicians, orators and ordinary Americans of all persuasions, and most famously by Presidents Kennedy, Reagan, and Obama.

Or course, the phrase, "a city on the hill," has been only one expression of American exceptionalism—perhaps the most memorable, but by no means the only one. In the first Federalist paper arguing for the adoption of the United States constitution, Alexander Hamilton—yes, he of the Broadway hit, *Hamilton*—Hamilton wrote this about America: "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice."

That is quite a calling. And in an 1862 address to Congress Abraham Lincoln called the United States "the last best hope on earth . . . which God must forever bless." And in front of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have a dream, it is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . This is our hope . . . With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day. . . if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.'

That is quite a calling. And these are only a few of the better-known expressions of "American exceptionalism," an idea which (as I've said) is being kicked around in our contemporary cultural disagreements.

To those on the right, American exceptionalism, and this country's being a shining city on hill, is an indisputable fact, which has produced some of the greatest blessings in human history and anyone who dares question that and them is an unpatriotic, blame-America-first, well . . . you know, one of *them*.

But to those on the left, American exceptionalism is a dangerous delusion, which has produced some of the greatest wrongs in our history, and anyone who dares question that and them is a jingoistic, America-love-it-or-leave-it, well . . . you know, one of *them*.

And so back and forth the football gets kicked—just google (as I did) “American exceptionalism,” or (for this weekend) “Martin Luther King and American exceptionalism,” and you’ll see what I mean.

But whole idea of American exceptionalism is based on the idea of God calling a people to some shared task or destiny. And that idea goes back before our contemporary disagreements, before Obama, Reagan and Kennedy, before King, Lincoln, and Hamilton, before even John Winthrop. It goes back through John Calvin and his emphasis on individual calling, back even farther to Jesus’ calling his disciples in the sermon on the mount, and even farther to God calling the prophets and Moses, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham and Sarah. “Your descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands by the sea,”—that is quite a calling.

So it might be worthwhile to go back and look at that idea of being called, if only to get beyond our contemporary cultural disagreements. So start here: When Jesus calls his disciples to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill, what does he mean? When he says this, what is he calling us to?

The rest of the sermon on the mount answers that question: He’s calling us to turn the other cheek, to walk the extra mile, to love our enemies, to give to those who ask from us, to pray steadfastly, sincerely and persistently, to love God—and not money—with all our hearts, souls, and minds, not to judge others but to trust in God and not be anxious; in short, in everything we say and do, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us; and finally and most of all to be not just hearers of his words but doers of his words.

That’s quite a calling. And that’s the life he’s calling all of us to. And as you can see, it’s no easy task. In fact, as many have observed, it would be impossible were it not for God’s grace acting through us, through others, through our communities and especially in and through the church.

But if that’s what it means to be called collectively what does it mean for each of us, individually, to be called by God?—Well, this is John Calvin’s bailiwick: “The Lord bids *each* of us, Calvin writes, “in *all* life’s actions to look to his calling.” In other words, we all (“each of us”) have a calling, in fact, many callings (“in all life’s actions”)—God-given tasks that we are meant to do—throughout the course of our lives.

It’s not just bishops or priests, or those in holy orders—it’s each of us. Our workers downstairs in the nursery right now have every bit as much a divine calling as I do up here (and no doubt a more difficult one). As do everyone of you in everything you do. Calvin says: “Every task, no matter what the world thinks of it, will shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight, provided you obey your calling in it.”

And as for the difficulty of those tasks, Calvin says: “Each of us will bear and swallow the vexations, weariness and anxieties in our way of life, when we have been persuaded that the burden was laid upon us by God.”

So grant for a moment, that we have a general calling as followers of Christ, along the lines Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount, and that we each, as Calvin says, have particular callings throughout our lives to which we must be faithful—grant all that: how do we stay true to them?

“Tell me what you love.” If I had to sum up the best of what has been called the Western tradition, it might be in those five words: “Tell me what you love.” It’s not where and when and to whom we’re born—the historical period, the country, the particular place, the tribe, community or family—that makes us what we are. It’s not even what we do with our lives: our jobs, our professions, our accomplishments. These things of course shape us, but it’s what we love—it’s what we love—that’s what makes us who and what we are, that defines our lives.

Don’t take the point too literally: someone who loves artichokes does not become an artichoke. But someone who loves food, more than anything else in the world and to the exclusion of all else, does become a glutton; someone who loves money more than anything else, a miser; power, a tyrant; social status and recognition, a vain and empty person. On the other hand, someone who loves God and neighbor above all else, becomes a good and godly person. Consider this scene from Mark’s Gospel:

They gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Tell me what you love. Our hearts are restless, God, until they rest in you. Tell me what you love. Of course, we love many things—from artichokes to our neighbors—in many ways and at many times and to many varying degrees—as we

should. But the question is: what do we love first and foremost? what do we organize our lives and our endeavors around? What is it that we really want? And that's not always to answer or easy to know—it's all too easy to become mere hearers—and not doers—of the word. The possibility of *self*-delusion and *shared* delusion always lurks.

We can be saying one thing while doing quite another, and often we are. I can be saying that I'm loving God and my neighbor when in fact I'm loving only myself and my own interests (or at least what I take to be my own interests) above all else and to the exclusion of all else. And so hypocrisy hangs around faith and the church, like the devil hangs around a good party—not invited, but always trying to sneak in in disguise, to take all the good stuff and leave only emptiness.

That's again why we need grace and why Augustine prays his prayer: "Order me in my love, O Lord, order my in my loves." Order me in my love, O Lord, order my in my loves. Help me truly to love first things first, and second things second. Help me, in all my loves, and in all the things I love, to love you with all my heart, soul and mind, and my neighbor as myself."

But that prayer—like the very question, tell me what you love—is based on a view of human nature. A view of human nature that sees us as radically incomplete, always in process, creatures who were meant for something greater than ourselves, who seek completion and fulfillment beyond themselves; in short, sees us a creatures of desire and love and therefore defined by what we desire and love. Tell me what you love.

We are creatures created and called to love God. And if we love as we should, we will remain true to our callings. And that's why it always frustrates me so much when that that phrase "city on a hill" gets plucked so frequently from John Winthrop's sermon. It's not that I'm against the phrase or against it being applied to our country. (I'm not taking sides in the culture wars.). I believe this nation, like every nation, like every individual, does have a calling and callings—some overarching and more general, others more specific and localized. And I believe that the phrase, "city on a hill," does express one of our most important ones.

No, what frustrates me is that nobody *ever reads the rest of the sermon*. Now, I know, I know: it's a 17th-century *Puritan* sermon, which means (1) it's *long*, (2) it's *dense* with a tight, logical structure that lays out one point after another after another, (3) it's *thick* with Scriptural references, one after another after another after another, and (4) have I mentioned that it's *long*. And yet, in places, it soars. It's poetry. Right before, he invokes the phrase "city on a hill," Winthrop explains what it means to be a city on the hill. In other words, he explains what they—what we—are called to do. It's a long, dense, and thick passage, but it's also poetry. You ready? Here goes:

"[We must] follow the counsel of Micah, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one. We must listen to each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our calling and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

Tell me what you love. If we love as we should—if we love justice, kindness, and humility, if we love unity and peace, if we love our neighbor as ourselves, if we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, we will remain true to our calling and our callings. And so perhaps, by God's grace, our culture disagreements will not become like wars and not lead us into real ones.

I'm not saying it will be easy. It's not easy to love our neighbor as ourselves, especially when we disagree with our neighbor, especially on questions we think important. But with grace . . . as Calvin said: "Each of us will bear and swallow the vexations, weariness and anxieties in our way of life, when we have been persuaded that the burden was laid upon us by God."

But with God's grace, we shall mount up with wings like eagles; we shall run and not be weary; we shall walk and not faint.

"With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day. . . if America is to be a great nation, this must become true."

May it be so through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.