

**“GOD FIRST,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, at St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 4, 2021**

Congregation, I love America. This is a great country. It’s been good to me. And to my family, which emigrated to these shores and landed in Detroit shortly after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I grew up taught to appreciate America. In my school classrooms, year upon year, we daily recited the Pledge of Allegiance to our nation and flag, offering testimony of patriotism—a love of our nation. But, more than just reciting the pledge, we were educated in what it meant to be a citizen. Yes, in those days the stress was on being a good citizen, rather than a good consumer. This was not only emphasized in what we learned about American history but also the functioning of our Constitution and government at national and state levels. In all those lessons, our freedom as Americans was celebrated. Yet all such talk of our freedoms was presented in the context of our responsibility to respect the rights of others and to realize that this might mean some limits or constraints on our own rights.

Significantly, there was never any claim that America was perfect. Instead, the message I heard was that America’s greatness lay in its capacity to correct and improve itself to better fulfill its ideals of liberty and justice for all. Even as a kid, the words of that cherished hymn *America the Beautiful* resonated with me where it calls upon God to help us as Americans “mend” every “flaw.”

Of course, one of America’s flaws was even obvious to me as a kid back then. Both newspapers and television news were full of stories about the struggle for Civil Rights, especially in the south, but also in the north. I’ll never forget either, my grandfather, an immigrant from Russian Poland with only a fifth grade education but much moral insight nonetheless, lamenting that slavery and racism were America’s stubborn “original sin” that needed repentance and healing. Fortunately, as he saw it, there really did seem to be the will on the part of the American people to do better for everybody, checking prejudice and injustice.

My granddad’s sober remarks about our nation’s “original sin” have never left me. The way he put America’s race problem in religious terms made me think all the more about how citizenship and religion do meet. They can’t--or shouldn’t be--separated. Citizenship is an arena in which our real faith values gets expressed, tested, and tried. Indeed, the way we act as citizens says a lot about the kind of faithful--or unfaithful--people we are.

As citizens, we stand morally accountable before God. Americans used to understand this. This is why the British poet and essayist, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, who was also a Christian, early in the twentieth century so astutely described America as a “nation with the soul of a church.” Moreover, in a 1921 lecture delivered to fellow Brits entitled “What I Saw in America,” recounting his experiences visiting here, Chesterton went on to note that what made America as a nation like none other was the fact that we are a republic uniquely founded on a Judeo-Christian creed—namely “All Men Are Created Equal.”

Significantly, three decades later our country further validated Gilbert Keith Chesterton’s assessment of America’s religiosity and creedalism when on June 14, 1954 the U.S Congress added the two words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance upholding the ideal of “one nation indivisible...with liberty and justice for all.” In the face of the brutal, amoral totalitarian systems of government that arose in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union where people were expected to worship the nation and its leader as a kind of god, American leaders wanted to make resolutely clear that in our own exercise of power and might we really did feel and embrace a deeper and abiding sense of moral accountability to our real maker and creator.

Of course, I love the entire Pledge of Allegiance, which was originally penned in 1892 and first recited as part of festivities for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. But right next to its long-hallowed language of “one nation indivisible...with liberty and justice for all,” which affirms the shining outcome of our country’s Civil War, I regard those two later added words “under God” as equally important—if not *more* important. They explain the proper context of the liberties and justice we are all called to cherish as Americans. Our faith in God inspires our commitment to real freedom and real justice. It also helps us sustain our commitment to both as a moral duty.

Frankly, congregation, it worries me greatly that today there are so many who have come to scorn America’s traditional religiosity, which Chesterton regarded as a virtue—*not* a failing or limitation in our part. These same secularly-minded folks actually contend that our constitutionally enshrined separation of church and state merits deletion of the Pledge of Allegiance’s “under God” language. Otherwise, they argue, we should dispense with the pledge and its God-language altogether. But don’t these religiously-phobic folks realize that in excising God from civic life and language, by —among other things—editing or abandoning the Pledge of Allegiance, we are almost suicidally knocking out the props or foundations that have heretofore grounded and fortified our convictions about freedom, justice, and equality? The whole notion of America “under God” helps us

remain a more moral and humane society, alert to our stated ideals. It also helps us get back on track when we go astray.

Some of the worst moments in American history have unfolded when we have forgotten our moral accountability to God and acted as if might makes right. This has led to the terrible mistreatment of native American peoples, African-Americans, and also immigrant populations from the early nineteenth-century to the present. It has also produced corrupt government—the “swamp” that we perennially condemn. Yet the better angels of our nature have been evoked by the call to moral conscience and the abiding conviction that any dishonesty or injustice on our part as citizens or promulgated by our leaders comes under God’s judgment.

In the dark days of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln in public and private repeatedly invoked God’s name and authority, warning that the divine judgment upon us would be harsh if we did not bring slavery to an end. Likewise, in the twentieth century America became a moral beacon to the world because in the aftermath of two terrible world wars we took a stand on behalf of human rights globally and often acted in unselfish and enlightened ways to help other nations and peoples. That was a just thing. That—to borrow the words of a Baptist colleague of mine—was a “God thing.”

Yes, historically, our Christian faith has made us better citizens. The biblical mandate to be a “chosen race, the King’s priests, God’s own people” has for the most part rendered us more responsible and conscientious contributors to the well-being of our entire society, as well as the larger world. (1 Peter 2:9) Our conviction that Jesus’ way of love and righteousness is the way that we should live everyday has redounded to the greater glory of our American nation, just as it was intended to bring glory to the “people Israel.” (Luke 2:32)

In our own times there has been an upsurge of rhetoric about “America First.” But as true Christians we do not forget the first of the Ten Commandments which demands that we shall no other gods before God Almighty. (Exodus 20:3) We worship God, not country. We love America but we love God even more. We are Christians first and foremost because our nation *is* “under God.” We are each called to honor and serve God, which may require that we sacrifice immediate, selfish national interests. Indeed, as a God-fearing, God-loving people, we *shouldn’t want to do anything that would shame us before God and defy God’s will and loving purposes for us and all the peoples of the world.*

Actually, we are better patriots when we do what God expects and requires of us—namely by acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly. (Micah 6:8) As the Old

Testament Book of Proverbs further declares in a wisdom that anticipates the teachings of Jesus and the gospels: “Righteousness makes a nation great; sin (which is selfishness) is a disgrace to any nation.” (*Proverbs 14:34*) In fact, as both Old and New Testaments further affirm, God blesses moral might, which is righteousness, over physical might, where power is exercised for power’s sake and usually the benefit of a few. That is why little Israel at her best survived as long as she did in ancient times when other mighty empires perished. And that’s also why Israel’s legacy has in the West outlived even ancient Greece and Rome in all their grandeur.

As we worship Sunday after Sunday, the flags of our faith and our nation stand side by side, a dozen feet apart--in this case, one not taller than the other. That’s potent symbolism, isn’t it?

How wonderful that we have a nation where we can worship freely and openly as Christians. Yet how no less terrific that our nation has a people who bring to citizenship all the virtues inspired, encouraged, and sustained by Christian teaching and faith. The separation of church and state mandated by our American constitution of 1789 has a positive double effect. On the one hand, it protects churches from undue government interference and control. On the other hand, it defends our government from coming under the sway of sectarian dominance, where one church or one religion commandeers its power and authority. Both scenarios, which have befallen other countries, are bad.

At the same time, we don’t want the distance between these two flags to ever become too great. The point I can’t stress enough on this Fourth of July is that the health of any nation is not well served where religion and state become antagonistic or the operation of a government ends up far removed from the faith of her people.

This morning let’s take to heart the hopeful and buoyant words of the hymns we sing celebrating the wonderful way that God seeks to bless our American nation and how we as a righteous and loving people can honor God. Yes, our hymns offer us a positive vision: True faith and deep patriotism don’t have to be at odds with each other. Instead, our dedicated citizenship can become a realm and means to serve God faithfully, just as Christ called us to do. May the spirit of God guide us all to be faithful servants and citizens. **Amen.**