

“A NATION UNDER GOD,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 3, 2022

This Fourth of July weekend we join with fellow Americans to celebrate our nation’s birthday, dating to the Declaration of Independence of 1776. Across our country, it has always been a proud holiday. But if we know our American history, we know that there are other early dates equally worth enshrinement through memory and celebration. On September 17, 1782, for instance, the Constitutional Convention finished its work in Philadelphia. Six years later, on June 11, 1788, the last of the former thirteen colonies finally ratified the Constitution. However, it wasn’t until December 15, 1791 that the Bill of Rights was finally approved and added as an Constitutional amendment, upholding the civil liberties that most Americans cherish. At the close of the Constitutional Convention, participant Benjamin Franklin was reputedly asked by a Philadelphia crowd what kind of government the delegates had agreed upon for us all. “A republic,” he is said to have quickly retorted, “*if you can keep it.*”

Over the past two centuries plus since the ratification of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights Benjamin Franklin’s quip has haunted many. It also haunts me. Of course, today my own concern is less about the basic preservation of a republic and more about the kind of republic we’re committed to preserving. How democratic? How fair and just? How compassionate?

I know that there are some people who in their interpretation of constitutionally mandated church-state separation and the “free exercise of religion” are disposed to ban the merest talk of moral values from our public square. But that’s far from the intentions of our founders, including that non-conformist Benjamin Franklin, who like the rest believed that personal religious conviction and moral values did matter for the quality of citizenship and the future well-being of the new American republic. I fully share the founders’ concern for our nation’s moral values and overall civic virtue. Without a strong sense of virtue and values among citizens no democratic society can ever survive for long.

On the one hand, it *is* wrong and bad in a pluralistically democratic society like our own if any one group tries to impose its religious or philosophical views on others. I, for one, found it rather alarming last week that five Roman Catholic justices, forming a majority on the U. S. Supreme Court, decided public policy on a highly controversial and disputed issue over and against a majority of Americans not sharing their theological, anthropological, or judicial views. On the other hand, we would be naïve not to recognize that just as our political views have theological implications, our theological views have political implications and that public morals are important for the health of our republic. Obviously, it’s important to strike a balance and the right one between the demand for individual liberty and the need for some kind of civilized, substantive, shared morality.

Truth be told, all human beings are inherently religious and spiritual in nature. Even atheists and agnostics, who deny or question the existence of the very God which we Christians, as well as Jews and Muslims, profess, still worship one god or another. Often, it simply comes

disguised as some “ultimate concern.” In short, atheists and agnostics, who often have a superiority complex, are not as un-religious or religiously neutral as they imagine themselves to be. Inevitably, our different theologies and philosophies are going to clash, whether a little or a lot, in the public square, all manifested through politics.

In his own life and ministry Jesus experienced this meeting of religion and politics at first-hand. As God’s son, he was the most spiritual of beings. In his own words, his kingdom “was not of this world.” (*John 18:36*) He sincerely believed and even preached that the world as we know it was already about to vanish. In what he called “The Lesson of the Fig Tree,” he predicted that God would usher in his ultimate kingdom within the lifetime of his audience, adding: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (*Mark 13:28-31*) Nevertheless, Jesus’ spiritual teachings upset the powers that were—both the Jewish and Roman establishments of his day who regarded his merest existence as Savior, as well as what he was teaching and preaching, as a subversive threat not only to their own religious way of thinking but also their political power and control.

Remember old King Herod? He tried to kill Jesus in the crib, so to speak. Wisely grabbing the infant Jesus from the Bethlehem manger, stepfather Joseph spirited him out of the country to preserve his innocent life. It was at least a couple of years before the Holy Family was able to return to Israel from their exile in a safe but distant Egypt. (*Matthew 2:13-23*)

And with Jesus’s ministry launched, there was more clash and conflict. In his so-called “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus proclaimed that the poor and the despised of the prevailing society were blessed and cherished in God’s sight. (*Matthew 5: 3, 5, 11-12*) Thereafter, at a time when ordinary people across the Judean countryside were being gouged and oppressed by high taxes and land confiscations, Jesus paid high honor to that poor widow who had only the means to deposit a couple of copper coins in the coffers of the Great Jerusalem Temple. (*Mark 12:38-44*) Further angering the Jewish or Roman establishments he openly warned against hypocritical “teachers of the law who like to walk around in their long robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplace, who choose the reserved seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts.” Jesus pointedly noted that these same teachers were among those “tak[ing] advantage of widows and rob[bing] them of their homes, and then mak[ing] a show of saying long prayers.” (*Mark 12:38-39*)

Compounding the displeasure and consternation of his politically minded and manipulative foes, who were now talking incessantly against him, Jesus subsequently overturned tables of money traders and pigeon sellers in the Temple’s outer precincts. He boldly condemned them for converting that hallowed place from a “house of prayer” into a “den of robbers” and “thieves.” (*Matthew 21:13; Luke 19:46*) Not afraid to share bad news, Jesus openly prophesized that the punishment for these religious hypocrites “will be all the worse” than for other sinners. (*Mark 12:40*) He then correctly informed his own apostles--and anyone else who had ears to listen--that the entire Temple edifice and all that went with it, would in all of

its corruption soon be leveled by cataclysm. (*Mark 13:1-2*) In all this, the Jewish and Roman establishments probably saw Jesus as giving rash encouragement to subversive protest and popular rebellion.

What was overwhelmingly a moral and spiritual matter for Jesus, who cared deeply about what was righteous and unselfish, loomed as a political challenge and economic threat to those whom he directly confronted and critiqued. Not prepared to accept him as God's son, they hated him for the moral and spiritual man he was, just as they had hated John the Baptist before him. Ultimately, this was what got Jesus killed with the Jewish and Roman establishments colluding to eliminate him. He was crucified under the false charge that he claimed to be the messianic "King of the Jews," poisoning himself to topple the Herodian dynasty from its dynasty and run the Romans out of town. Indeed, a "King of the Jews" placard was mockingly posted high on his cross and in three languages no less—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. (*Matthew 27:37*)

Jesus was not naïve. Long before he ended up on Calvary's hill, he knew how swiftly the moral and spiritual can be reduced in many people's minds to something merely political. At one point, Jesus actually wept for Jerusalem in all of its shallow ignorance and moral perfidy. (*Luke 19:41*) As he explained out loud at another moment: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under the wings, but you would not let me! And so your Temple will be abandoned and empty." (*Matthew 23:37-38*) Here Jesus was not only anticipating his own death, but also the destruction of the City of David—all due to the faithlessness, meanness, and moral hypocrisy on the part of Jerusalem's leadership and general citizenry.

More than two thousand years separate us from Jesus' day. But the moral and spiritual integrity of any given society matter. Always have, always will. Likewise, the morality and spirituality of America matters, registered in the presence or absence of compassion, justice, and righteousness in our daily life. Moral and spiritual deficiencies not only invite God's judgment against us, but inevitably undermine social cohesion and spawn chaos, making us more vulnerable to worldly foes. Some days I do wonder if the accelerating social polarization, discord, and chaos which we witness in our American republic today isn't already a part of God's judgment upon us for being far more selfish and much less righteous than he ever intended us to be.

As I suggested earlier, in a republic like our own where the establishment of any official state religion is constitutionally prohibited, we do have to be especially thoughtful and careful about the public exercise of morality and spirituality. We are not entitled to ignore the rights and freedoms of others, who may not see eye to eye with us. But we don't serve anyone, least of all ourselves before God, when we stand embarrassed or ashamed that we are a people of faith with moral virtues and values that might take us a step or two into the political arena.

Here, as men and women who look to God's kingdom but continue in this world and nation, we should heed further advice of Jesus from the same afore-mentioned Sermon on the Mount. In words both wise and poetic, Jesus reminds us from that mount: "You are the salt for all humankind. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It becomes worthless, so it is thrown out." (*Matthew 5:13*) Our Savior then adds: "You are the light for the whole world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl, [but] instead...puts it on the lampstand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven." (*Matthew 5:14-16*)

Of course, in following Jesus' advice, we do have to make sure that our saltiness is genuine faith and that the light that we are shining is the light of God's wisdom and truth. In our own fraught times, we do see some folks in the guise of piety making some strange politics their religion. This is nothing but idolatry, the worship of a false god in the name of God, condemned by the Ten Commandments. To litmus test the faithfulness of anything and everything we espouse, all we have to do is check out our alignment with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. Are our talk and action truly in keeping with the humility, love, generosity, devotion, purity, and peacefulness that Jesus extols in his hillside talk as the highest virtues for us as Christian men and women? (*Matthew 5:5-9*)

Further help on this score comes from Jesus' half-brother James who offers his own pithy advice on recognizing true faithfulness in ourselves and others. In his one and only New Testament epistle, James, well-known in his own time for his moral and spiritual rectitude, most insightfully declares: "Does anyone think he is religious? If he does not control his tongue, his religion is worthless and he deceives himself. What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of widows and orphans in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world." (*James 1:26-27*) James goes on to scorn as unfaithful those who, through mean and unkind judgments or outright discrimination and neglect, "dishonor the poor" and the disadvantaged already humbled by life circumstances. (*James 2:6*) A righteous nation that loves God knows that selfishness, greed, and prejudice are immoral and that we need to transcend them so that greater equity and justice can prevail for all. Congregation, this is the true meaning of living as "a nation under God."

In the Old Testament God says through the Prophet Isaiah: "I will give you as a light to the nations." (*Isaiah 49:6*) Obviously, God is talking about his People Israel. Yet there's no reason why we as Christians can't be a light to our own ostensibly secular nation. Yes, as in times past, we can by our own commitment to what is compassionate, and just, serve as a moral leaven to America as a whole, helping to renew or restore it as a light on a hill to other nations of this world until God's kingdom comes. May we each strive to be God's dedicated servants and Christ's faithful disciples by the high moral and spiritual integrity with which we daily exercise our duties of citizenship in a republic well worth keeping. **Amen.**