



Date: July 2, 2017

Title: "God Bless America"

Scripture: Jeremiah 7:1-7, Matthew 5:13-16

Description: One Sunday a year, I preach on politics. What can I say that will be both biblical and useful? This is my answer.

On this one Sunday throughout the entire year, I preach on politics. I'm not only given freedom to do so, I'm more or less expected to preach politics. But what am I to say? Many Americans are frightened or angry or discouraged about our nation today. Me, too. On the other hand, when I consider ordinary citizens, I like America. I find many of us working to make our nation a good place; they are doing this by trying to be good people.

This was reflected in a very small way in a conversation among my neighbors gathered in the cul de sac on an early summer evening. One of the neighbors announced that he had read that one-half of the traffic accidents in our county were the result of "courtesy" moves, i.e. people stopping to allow a car to turn or enter from a side street. "One half!" he exclaimed. "Maybe so," said the fellow next door, quietly. "But I'm still going to let people go in front of me." Every head in the circle nodded in agreement. It was not a heroic, headline moment, but it was revealing.

Driving to Tucker in the deluge rainstorm last Tuesday afternoon, we saw driver after driver pause and motion for another car to change lanes in front of them or to allow a car to enter from a side street. Perhaps when citizens endure a storm, we become kinder to each other.

What shall I preach when the subject is our nation and our faith? When I search the scriptures, I note that whenever God spoke to the kings or people in power about what God thought about events, it wasn't to hand out atta-boys and give gold plaques. When the Bible speaks about political issues, it usually delivers a stern "shape up!" message. I don't like to fuss from the pulpit. What shall I say that is biblical, prophetic?

This is not my story, though it happened in the days of my youth. It happened in the mid-1960's when the boy was in high school. He had his eye on a girl he'd met when he

went to her church one Sunday. He knew the church was a hardline church, but it was not her theology that attracted him to this girl, so he overlooked that and asked her for a date.

The sermon preached that Sunday condemned the evils of Rock 'n Roll, and especially the new satanic rite called, "The Twist," so the young man wisely chose not to ask this girl to a dance. Instead, he prudently chose to take her to the movies. "The Sound of Music" seemed to be pretty wholesome. Who could object to Julie Andrews?"

Wrong.

As they left the house, the girl's father stood in the driveway, blocking their exit. "You know what we believe about movies and the sins of Hollywood," he declared to his daughter. "If you go to this film, you'll be trampling on everything that we've taught you to believe." She fled back into the house in tears as their movie date evaporated before their eyes.

A few years later, that father watched "The Sound of Music" on TV — and liked it.

As the parent of two daughters, both now grown, I admire that father. The father was onto something about faith: your faith is supposed to make you different in this world. A Christian is not supposed to easily fit in with our culture. We're supposed to be different; we're supposed to make a difference.

I just wish that in the 1960's the father had chosen to break with society on racism or nuclear arms or violence in the cities. Instead, he chose Julie Andrews.

I'll name something I am 100% against. I am vigorously opposed to terrorism. Because terrorism produces terror. More than death and random violence, terror can destroy our lives. Terror's close cousin, fear, has the same effect.

Very reluctantly, I have concluded that on that horrible morning of 9/11/2001, the terrorists achieved their aims. Americans have become terrified. We now feel that we are under attack. We have identified ISIS or radical Muslims as our worst enemy and labeled them as evil personified. We are, in truth, under attack, and radical terrorists are indeed our enemy. But our worst threat comes from within. We are our own worst enemy.

Fear is a faith issue that plays itself out politically. A major political strategy these days is to 1) identify a problem, 2) make people afraid of it, and 3) show that the other side caused the problem.

I am not at my best when I am afraid. In fact, I often act my worst when I act out of fear. When I become afraid of poverty, for example, I tend to seal myself off from the poor, distancing myself as far as possible from them, speaking of *them* as if they were not us. It is very hard for fearful people to be generous people. When I am afraid of dying I will pursue any medical means to safeguard my health, regardless of whether those procedures improve the quality of my health. It is very hard for those afraid of death to truly live.

Too often churches have taught that the opposite of love is hate. I don't think so. The Bible says the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. "There is no fear in love..."

(1 John 4:18) "Be not afraid" is one of the most frequent commands in the Bible. Our policies should be based not on fear, but on faith. Our country's motto is still, "In God we *trust*." It has not been changed to "In terrorists we fear." Publicly moving from fear to faith is a moral value, a religious issue.

Terrorists' suicide bombs can cause tragic disasters, but in the long run, terrorists serve to unite us, clarify our vision, and strengthen our resolve. On the other hand, we ourselves can bring an entire society to her knees. We attack each other and declare each other as the ones to be resisted rather than work together to bring about a new birth of freedom in our nation. We citizens will ultimately control whether the heart of this great nation beats strong or slowly declines in debilitating weakness.

We may continue to say that we are "one nation, under God..." but I am disturbed that we do not *live* as one nation under God. To use the unforgettable words of Abraham Lincoln, "We are now engaged in a great civil war, testing whether this nation...can long endure."

What is your role in this nation? "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...Let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

I am convinced that in our times, we Christians have no more important calling than to keep whispering in the ears of a world that accepts fear rather than trust as a way of life, that accepts greed and self-interest rather than service as a way of life. We Christians must say, "These are in fact the ways of death. There is another way that leads to life. There is another way that *is* life itself." "For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" Our role is to pull on the coattails of Uncle Sam and say, "These are *not* the ways of God." Our role is to stand with and for Jesus Christ, who said, "Follow me."

This sermon is not about the President and senators and congressmen. It is not about the news media. “*You* are the salt of the earth...” *You* are the ones to act out integrity, to practice virtue, to work and walk uprightly. “*You* are the salt of the earth.”

You are called to be the people who make a difference. We are called to be a church that is a beacon of light on a hilltop. In this world, America has been given the destiny to be a great nation; we are those who are called to take our places as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

We are the ones who know and must speak the truth. We are the ones who must embody the values we say we affirm.

Not the one with the most military might will win, but the One with the most love will win. Not the one with the most power, but the One with the most justice will win. Not the one with the strongest economy, but the one with the most freedom. Not the one with the highest profit margin but the one with the most truth. The one with the most mercy will win. The one with the most integrity will win. The one with the most morality will win.

It must begin somewhere. let it begin here. Let’s not merely complain about what happens in the nation’s capital. Let’s decide to practice honesty, to speak truth plainly, to act with integrity, to live in the light. Let decency and honesty and integrity come upon us, not from the top down but from the inside out. You are salt. You are light. Go out into your beautiful nation and shine the light of Christ. Thus shall God bless America.