

## **America the Beautiful**

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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At the close of this worship service we will sing a national song entitled “America the Beautiful.” The words are a poem, written in 1893 by one Katherine Lee Bates, an instructor at Wellesley College. The inspiration for the poem, which first appeared in print on July 4, 1895, was the view from the top of Pikes Peak in Colorado. Soon after it was published, people were singing the poem, putting it to any tune that would fit, including the tune of Auld Lang Syne. I tried it. Very odd.

*America! America!*

*God shed His grace on thee,*

*And crown thy good with brotherhood*

*From sea to shining sea!*

As a child I thought we were asking God to crown people who were good with brotherhood. I was relieved when it was explained to me that the poem asks God to crown all the good God has created here in North America – our beautiful natural landscapes, our natural resources, our mighty cities, our liberties, our energy, our way of life – crown all that with brotherhood. And brotherhood? Brotherhood is a 19th century (and late into the 20th century) word for bonds of love and mutual responsibility, responsibility to one another. We Christians might well substitute the word “community.”

Our national songs can be and frequently are heavily critiqued for their triumphalism; their unquestioning acceptance, not to say affirmation, of the doctrine of manifest destiny, the way they implicitly laud and magnify Northern European privilege, domination and conquest at the price of the lives and livelihoods and possessions of indigenous peoples; all the while using, abusing, objectifying African peoples. Let’s be frank: that is all there in our history, and it’s nothing to sing about. It is easy to join the singing, while denying the reality. An alternative would be to join in the singing and join together in the resolve to have the scales removed from our eyes. To acknowledge the great wounds that festered in our land, many of which fester still, and join in efforts at healing them.

At the same time, let us grant that there is a simultaneous story arising from our national life. It is the story of the abundant life that is possible here. It is the story of opportunity and possibility.

It could be the story of sharing opportunity through, say, humane immigration policy and humane treatment of immigrant people by those of us already here. Reading the Book of Acts, we find that all Christians are resident aliens – we came from God and are going to God – our home is elsewhere. Knowing this we could pray and work for true welcome in our land for the strangers.

We could even resolve to face what really happened in our national past in order to live with greater integrity in the present and build a future that rests upon repentance, reconciliation, transformation. A new life.

Notice when we sing “America the Beautiful” today the lyrics that speak to this: “God mend thine every flaw.” We acknowledge our flaws and the need for God’s work in healing them. “Confirm thy soul in self-control,” – imagine this nation exercising self-control in consumption or in international relations. Notice we will sing of heroes, who “more than self their country loved,” – who could give themselves to larger purpose. “And mercy more than life,” what a line! Think of the possibilities for a nation whose heroes love mercy more than life! That, my friends, is biblical!

Independence Day is one of my favorite secular holidays: reading the Declaration of Independence on the editorial page of the paper is an annual ritual. July 4 is the only day of the year when I make Maryland chicken: fried chicken, real fried chicken with milk gravy, a feast for the 4th. And while I’m working up the meal, from the very nation from which we declared independence, Wimbledon is on the TV in the kitchen. Then comes the feast, preceded by thanksgiving for life here and prayer for nation. And finally, the fireworks! Descendants of John Adams’ wish for bonfires in celebration. A great day!

This year, anticipating it has been mingled with praying and studying Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Questions have arisen. For example, what is freedom for people who name ourselves Christian in the United States? Is it a matter of individual rights? What is love? Is it a matter of personal, private experience? Of emotional involvement? Can an ancient text speak to us of freedom and love in ways that are helpful, and even healing? I think so.

For Paul, human beings are all subject to power. The question is what power do we live under? We are free when we live under the power of our merciful and loving God. We – and the “we” is important – do this through forming and caring for one another in a community gathered around the cross of Christ.

By contrast, culture formed around “flesh” is one in which people consciously or unconsciously place themselves under the power of destructive forces. “Flesh” is a technical term for Paul. He is not fixated on so-called sexual sins here. He does not think much in individual terms, as we tend to do. For Paul destructive sexual behavior is a mark of living according to the flesh, but only one of many. If we live according to the flesh, we live in a culture of alienation, exploitation, oppression and abuse.

The alternative offered by God is “living in the Spirit”. And living in the spirit, while it may be an over-arching term, has very practical implications and applications. Living in the Spirit means specific and real-time actions toward one another and toward the stranger that spring from patience and from generosity and from self-control and from kindness. You have the list in your bulletin insert. Take it home and think and pray on these things and on how our faith can inform our citizenship.

By way of example I remind us all that here in this worshiping community people are gathered around moving beyond systemic racism; people are gathered around praying and advocating for peace; people are gathered around ending (not coping with) but ending homelessness in our city; people are gathered around elder issues, around youth safety and an end to youth violence, around access to health care, around feeding the hungry. Gathered to address these issues because we are Christians; because Christ calls us to do it.

Revenge, retaliation, arrogance, delusions of power and privilege, denying others freedom and access to community – all these things can be healed in communities of people who help one another into the selflessness we experience in Christ’s self-sacrifice. Such communities change the life of every single member and declare possibilities for change, for transformation to those parts of the world in which they are planted.

That is the hope and the certainty at the center of Paul’s faith; at the center of ours. So as we sing “America the Beautiful” at the conclusion of our worship today, know that it is worshiping communities such as ours who are called to be the channels of God’s grace to our country, to our world. We are here to be constantly forming into a people who hear and serve the purpose of God for God’s world, God’s redeeming purpose for God’s world.

*America! America!  
God shed God’s grace on thee  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining to sea.*

Amen.