

LOOKING FOR A SOUL

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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A group of South Dakota high school students typed the Declaration of Independence in manuscript form. They stripped it of its parchment appearance, removed it from the old English type, and circulated copies of it as petitions throughout the community. Fifty percent of those approached refused to sign it. In a similar experiment in Miami, they got even fewer signatures. One man was asked if he would display the document in his store window. He said, "Well, the boss makes those decisions around here. But I can tell you right now, he's not going to like what you have written." Included in the Declaration of Independence is this paragraph which contains the heart of the document:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute the new Government.

Over fifty percent of our nation would refuse to endorse that document. Were they suspicious because young people asked them to sign? But if the Declaration of Independence is not recognized, or honored, or believed, where are we as a nation? No wonder we are confused. Are we not a nation looking for a soul-- for our essence, for the hub of the wheel, who we are and what we are about?

What are our primary concerns as a nation? Greed? To make money? We have a foreign policy designed in large part to protect our business interests. Our goals are small, short and shallow. Tom Goodhue, writing to men in the recent Quarterly Review, stated:

Our culture has an agenda for men which gives low priority to doing justice and heeding God's wisdom. We are expected to provide financial security for our families in a financially insecure world, to climb up the ladder even though hierarchies in our society are shaped more like pyramids than ladders, to be willing to die and kill for country even when our country is wrong. It is no wonder that men pay more homage to patriotism than justice, that we serve our careers more zealously than we serve the Lord.

Our goals are shallow, and we are overly concerned with self-preservation, refusing to believe that Jesus' observation in our gospel lesson today, Matthew 10:39, also applies to nations, "They who seek to save their lives will lose them," refusing to heed the warning of Hosea, the prophet, in 10:13, "Because you trusted in your chariots and in the large number of your soldiers, war will come to your people, and all your fortresses will be destroyed." To place ultimate confidence in our arsenal stockpiles is a sign of bankruptcy, a nation looking for a soul, a nation groping for hope. The current movement to turn back the clock, to regain yesterday's morality, yesterday's relationships, yesterday's simplicity in this complex world, is a sign of the loss of hope. People who seem to live in yesterday have lost hope for the future.

There is an amazing parallel here between our nation and our denomination, for the United Methodist Church is also groping, looking for a soul, as I presented in four recent sermons. The General Conference, the body which meets every four years to determine our church's policies, laws, goals, met in April. According to my reading, it was a pitiful conference, spinning wheels, with little productive for long-range goals. J. Richard Peck, editor of the Circuit Rider magazine, summarized, "There were, of course, the high moments in Baltimore, capped by the celebration of our 200th birthday, but a Bicentennial should be a time when the church advances boldly into the next century, not a time when it timidly backpeddles into the past."

Amos' prediction rings true with our church and with our nation, "The time is coming when I will send famine on the land (says the Lord). People will be hungry, but not for bread; they will be thirsty, but not for water. They will hunger and thirst for a message from the Lord." We are looking for our soul. In four sermons, I preached hope for our church which, if our denomination is not yet ready, hopefully the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto is ready to hear and implement. Today, let us reflect on our nation. Where is our soul? What are we about as Americans?

Throughout history, kingdoms and nations have come and gone, risen to prosperity and influence, fallen to ruin and memory. The record of one such nation comes to us in the inspired pages of the Bible. Do you believe the Bible is inspired, the word of God? If so, then we should be diligently reading its description of the rise and fall of the kingdom of David and Solomon. The insights of the Old Testament prophets are of strategic importance to us in understanding what God is doing in and through governments. I believe, and it is a cardinal belief of our nation, that God has been actively involved in the United States of America. What God has been doing, what God is doing, and how we will fail as a nation if we do not heed what God is doing, is revealed to us in the writings of the prophets. We can judge our own nation by using the biblical criteria. Now it is crucial for us to use the entire Bible. Much of the religious right-wing of our day with its Moral Majority is using a verse here and there, but neglecting the full scope of the Bible.

The biblical message is clear: God blesses a nation when it honors God and benefits all people equally. Jesus summarized it: Love God and love neighbor.

First, honor God. The first commandment is clear: You shall have no other gods before me. Jeremiah lived during the destruction of Jerusalem. Trying to understand and help the people understand why they had fallen, Jeremiah preached, 2:4-8:

"What made your ancestors turn away from me? They worshipped worthless idols and became worthless themselves. They did not care about me, even though I rescued them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness: a land of deserts and sand pits, a dry and dangerous land where no one lives and no one will even travel. I brought them into a fertile land, to enjoy its harvests and its other good things. But instead they ruined my land; they defiled the country I had given them. The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' My own priests did not know me. The rulers rebelled against me; the prophets spoke in the name of Baal and worshipped useless idols."

A nation is judged when it betrays the Creator.

"I hate the pride of the people of Israel," Amos 6:8.

Secondly, a nation is judged, said John F. Kennedy in a remarkable paraphrase of the Bible, not by how it treats its best citizens, but by how it treats its worst. Amos 2:6, "The Lord says, 'The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and for this I will certainly punish them. They sell into slavery honest men who cannot pay their debts, poor men who cannot repay even the price of a pair of sandals. They trample down the weak and helpless and push the poor out of the way.'"

The United States of America was settled and founded by people who understood vividly the biblical message: God blesses a nation when God is honored and all people are welcome. Our documents give honor to God. Our nation was settled by refugees: economic refugees (people who fled starvation), political refugees (people who fled oppressive governments, and they are still coming to our shores), religious refugees (people who fled discrimination and came to practice their religion in freedom), and the outcasts, the unwanted. An entire colony, Georgia, was organized to bring prisoners here from England. The Statue of Liberty with its impressive height illustrates the soul of this nation. With a torch to the sky and an outstretched hand, she welcomes the unwanted:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

That is our soul, and when we have been faithful, we have been blessed. One way to read our history is to see the hand of God leading us in the struggle to provide equal opportunity for all people to pursue life, liberty and happiness. It took us awhile to extend the definition of "all men" to include nonland owners, then black and Chinese, then women. As long as the struggle was moving to God's purposes, we were blessed - as long as we pursued the goal: all are created equally, all deserve equal educational opportunities, all deserve food and a chance for employment in dignity. Two weeks ago today, at my son Jack's graduation from Stanford, we heard the President of Stanford University, Donald Kennedy, quote John Gardner: "Your commitments determine your identity." When we as a nation were committed to the goal of the Declaration of Independence, we had an identity, we knew who we were.

Where is our nation's soul? "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

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