

Christ Church
July 5, 2015
Sermon by Glo Wellman

Excerpts from Psalm 48 (The Message)

1_3 God majestic,
praise abounds in our God_city!
God's sacred mountain,
breathtaking in its heights—earth's joy.
Zion Mountain looms in the North,
city of the world_King.
God is in the peaks...
8 In God's city ...
Set on firm foundations,
firm forever.
9_10 We pondered our love_in_action, God,
waiting in Your temple:
Your name, God, evokes a train
of Hallelujahs wherever
It is spoken, near and far;
your arms are heaped with goodness_in_action.
11 Be glad, Zion Mountain;
Dance, Judah's daughters!
12_14 Circle Zion, take her measure,
count her fortress peaks,
Gaze long at her sloping bulwark,
climb her citadel heights—
Then you can tell the next generation
detail by detail the story of God,
Our God forever,
who guides us till the end of time.

I love fireworks...Some of you got to see this yourselves at my house last night. I love thunder and lightning. When I was a little toddler my mother stood with me at the window of our cottage in the Bahamas and clapped with glee when the lightning struck and thundered loudly right across the street. She didn't want her little one to be scared.... so today I am gleeful with fireworks.

This weekend we have celebrated our nation's independence from England and our freedoms today.

On June 11 1776, a committee, consisting of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston , and Roger Sherman was appointed to draft a Declaration of Independence. In his autobiography written in 1805, Adams states that the committee of five decided upon "which the declaration was to consist" [they discussed the particulars], and then appointed Jefferson and Adams to form a subcommittee to write it down. Thomas Jefferson was the primary writer, receiving just a few edits from others. The declaration began with poetry...

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable 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 to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

And then their grievances with the King of England were described.

No, this is not a history lesson.... This is a time of remembrance. Our national ancestors, that small group of men who were the governing body of our colonies stood up for what they believed. They were men of their times. They felt entitled to this beautiful land. They felt compelled to create a new nation.... as Abraham Lincoln would say about 90 years later, a nation "Conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"

We have come a long way since then. They had a more limited view based on the beliefs and values of those times than we do today. They said men, and they meant prosperous white men. But very thankfully, what Jefferson penned was broad enough to be interpreted more inclusively over the years. Now we have expanded on these concepts as a nation.... and we continue to do so, in what is sometimes a very hard fought battle to recognize ALL people as one.... all brothers and sisters. Even 239 years later, we still have work to do to secure these freedoms for all.

And right there, we're in trouble. Brothers and sisters don't always get along. Families are not always equally loving and supportive of each other. We are a church family, a faith community grounded and guided in love, right? Love one another.... yet, we know how difficult this is sometimes.

Today I stand before you, very grateful to live where I live. To be a part of this nation.... this local community... this church. Grateful also for the ancestors who blazed this trail before us. Even so, we know that too many have been hurt along the way. We also know that many, many continue to struggle.... in our own families.... among our friends... beyond to our neighbors and the wider world.... many struggle.

We are here today a part of THIS faith community because we take seriously Jesus' message of love. The commitment of participating in a faith community, working together to serve God's family is knit deeply into our very beings... into our make up. We can't imagine doing otherwise. And at the same time, it often feels like a very uphill struggle.

Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, Episcopalian who made the keynote address to the UCC general body shares his experience and his hope.

I was wary of church. But once inside, I came to love the church for

teaching me that I was beautifully and wonderfully made; and that to love myself and care for myself was a form of gratitude to my Creator. Years later, after I had been with my partner for 11 years, I was married in the Episcopal Church we now attend. It was one of the most moving events of my life, only rivaled by the baptism of our son, Walter, on this last Easter vigil.

You see, the Church for me, as a gay man, has been literally life-saving. Through its prophetic and pastoral care, the Church affirmed my humanity as a beloved child of God. In doing so, it called me to solidarity with others different from me, allowing me to recognize them as my sisters and brothers, all of us children of a God who loved us into being and wishes us to live together in peace with justice.

The issues of race and sexuality are just two recent examples of the vastly different ways people understand the role of the church and underscore the struggle that is happening right now. I know you can all think of many more examples from your own lives __ starting with gender, approaches to science, immigration, climate change income disparity, militarization and the list goes on and on.

...Rev. Clementa Pinckney, who died in AME church in Charleston SC, spoke about the essential quality of the church in 2013.

Rev. Pinckney said: "Could we not argue that America is about freedom whether we live it out or not? Freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness. And that is what church is all about: freedom to worship and freedom from sin, freedom to be full of what God intends us to be, and to have equality in the sight of God. "

Or to go more immediately to the source we can just listen to Jesus' first sermon when he quotes Isaiah in Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me, to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free"

Paul Raushenbush concludes -

In a world that continues to discriminate, denigrate and even murder, God's church can be recognized when it provides sanctuary for all people [so they can be] free to be fully themselves and free to feel the dignity and pride in what God created in them __ whatever race, gender, sexuality, culture, religion or size.

God's church will be known as truly God's church when it is out there on the streets demanding justice, as well as offering spiritual health within its walls.

Today we come here after celebrations of America's independence. We spent time with family and friends. We watched fireworks. We sang our patriotic songs and we swell with pride. We celebrate our freedom and yet many are still not fully free, even here in the United States of America.... where we're not always united.

One of my favorite patriotic songs is America the Beautiful....I especially love the Ray

Charles version. I wonder if you know the story about this poem.

Katharine Lee Bates was born in Massachusetts in 1859. In her early years, she was one of four children born to a minister and a schoolteacher. Her father died shortly after she was born, and her mother did whatever she could to support the family. Around the age of 12, Bates and her family moved to what is now Wellesley Hills to live with her mother's sister.

Despite their financial woes, Bates's mother made education a priority and Katharine was able to attend Wellesley College, one of the few institutions of higher learning open to women at the time. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1880. After several years as a teacher, in 1888, Bates joined the faculty of Wellesley College, first as an English instructor and later she became head of the college's English department. Over the years, Bates became known as a scholar of English literature, especially the works of William Shakespeare. She wrote several books.

About 1892, Bates spent part of the summer in Colorado. She was there lecturing at Colorado College. During her visit, she went on a hike to Pikes Peak. The view from this mountaintop inspired her most famous poem. She later said, "It was then and there, as I was looking out over the sea-like expanse of fertile country spreading away so far under those ample skies, that the opening lines of the hymn floated into my mind."

She first published her most famous poem, "America the Beautiful," in 1893.

Capturing the nation's majestic beauty and spirit, the poem became hugely popular. Its transformation to becoming a song was a gradual process. Many simply sang the words in the tune of a folk song, such as "Auld Lang Syne." It later followed the melody of Samuel Augustus Ward's "Materna." A contest was held in 1926 to create new music to set the poem to, but no strong candidates prevailed. Instead "Materna" became the standard melody still used today.

While she is largely remembered for "America the Beautiful," Bates only published a handful of poetry collections in her lifetime. Yellow Clover: A Book of Remembrance, one of her most recognized collections today, was actually published privately in 1922. Bates wrote this set of sonnets to honor the love of her love Katharine Coman. She and Coman, who were both professors at Wellesley, lived together for roughly 25 years. Bates was heartbroken over Coman's death in 1915.

Katharine Lee Bates died on March 28, 1929, in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Shortly after her death, there was an effort to establish "America the Beautiful" as the nation's anthem. The song, however, lost out to "The Star-Spangled Banner." Still, Bates's moving lyrics hold a special place in the hearts of many Americans. (Information from online)

We are going to sing together this song, "America the Beautiful." Let us take in these words, feel the variety and beauty of this place we call home. Consider the possibilities and opportunities that still await us and others. Let's remember the essence of the dream that our ancestors held so dearly... A dream of freedom that we also cherish.

For, God calls us to BE the church. As our scripture said, we will continue to "tell the next generation, detail by detail the story of God, Our God forever, who guides us till the end of time." We will continue to enter the story anew and make it our own as we DO God's work creating justice and freedom for all.

Will you please stand and sing with me, "America the Beautiful."

America the Beautiful
Words by Katharine Lee Bates,
Melody by Samuel Ward

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare of freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self_control,
Thy liberty in law!

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife.
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness
And every gain divine!

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for halcyon skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the enameled plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
Till souls wax fair as earth and air
And music_hearted sea!

O beautiful for pilgrims feet,
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
Till paths be wrought through
wilds of thought
By pilgrim foot and knee!

O beautiful for glory_tale
Of liberating strife
When once and twice,
for man's avail
Men lavished precious life!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
Till selfish gain no longer stain
The banner of the free!

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
Till nobler men keep once again
Thy whiter jubilee!