

Strangers and Pilgrims

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 2, 2023

Readings: Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48; Psalm 145:1-9

Sermon text: But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.
Hebrews 11:16

I take as my text this morning a passage from the letter to the Hebrews: But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

This comes as part of a passage in which the author of the letter, unknown to us, writes about heroes of faith who held on to the promises of God, even if long delayed, even if never achieved in this lifetime. As Abraham held on to the promise of children with Sarah even though both of them grew old waiting—even to late nineties. The letter to those who lived for a better world a promised land—but who never made it during their lifetime. But the author writes that they longed in away for a country, for a city they would reach only in heaven.

For an ideal of a country, for shining city on the hill, which appears as beckoning vision but which has never yet been reached.

St Augustine in his book *The City of God*, written after the sacking of Rome in 410, distinguished between the earthly city, like Rome and the heavenly patterned city of God: The city of man is based on the love of self while the city of God is based on the love of God and others. The earthly city is ruled by power; the heavenly city by love. The struggle between them is threaded throughout human history—back to Cain and Abel, writes Augustine—and will never end until the end of history. It will often seem that power and self love and the conflict that engenders among people will always tear down the efforts of love and ideals of God, as Cain indeed killed Abel, but this mistakes the slow but inevitable triumph of providence, the working out of God's economy. In the end, love wins.

That is our faith and our hope. And of course it is embedded in the history of this country, the United States of America, whose declaration of independence on July 4th, twelve score and seven years ago, we

celebrate this Tuesday. The stirring words of the declaration, that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, have been what Lincoln called our ancient creed all these years. We do not bow before lords and ladies, but all are free and equal before the law. Except of course for those who weren't, the enslaved people from Africa, the dispossessed people of the Americas. And the men part of the declaration was meant literally; women remained second class citizens.

Nevertheless the nation was founded on a stirring set of ideals, and every generation has tried in its way and according to its understanding of the time to achieve those ideals. And just as Augustine saw, every generation has failed—or rather rationalized away—these ideals in favor of self interest—greed—and power, although nevertheless we can see a slow arc of progress, hard fought and fragile. A tale of two countries—the fight as historian Jon Meacham put it (in a phrase the President Biden has found evocative) for the soul of America.

If you accept this national version of the biblical story—that we are striving for the promised land, the more perfect union, even as we must generation by generation defend the freedoms achieved—and carry them forward, and give thanks for the manifold blessings and endeavor to share them more broadly—it still remains more than probable that that God's kingdom will not come on earth as it is in heaven—that will remain a dream, a vision toward which we strive, but, like conquering sin and evil, always have to remember we are but human and sinners ourselves, even as we fight for the right and good.

A brief digression on Christian nationalism—a heresy. First of all historically inaccurate; our founders were a pluralist group of Christians and deists and skeptics—Jefferson a deist, Franklin a sceptic, Lincoln uncommitted. And Jews and animists and Muslims also. A pluralist country with no established religion as in England—indeed expressly opposed to that. Second, Christianity is not a political program. All kinds of folks can follow Christ but disagree on policies and politics. We all know this. We cannot let a group of Christian extremists capture the name of Christ to use as a political banner in a misguided crusade.

And this is where the teachings on kind treatment of strangers and Jesus even more radical teaching on love of enemies comes in.

For we are tempted to forget we were once strangers and enemies of God—as Paul puts it in one of his letters. We were all immigrants, except for those truly native to the land. So treat with respect and kindness—with justice and mercy—those arriving lately. Of course we must manage our borders—not an easy task—but we must not forget our heritage. Nor can we allow ourselves to demonize our political opponents or foreign opponents. Conflict in the arena of ideas and markets is inevitable and leads to innovation and change—often necessary. But we must love our enemies—see what is good in them and their position, work to win nonviolently and otherwise work for peace while continuing to strive for justice and enlarged prosperity and opportunity.

In Christ's name, amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY