



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## America, America

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 4, 2021  
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; Independence Day  
Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.  
Take our lips and speak through them.  
Take our hearts and see through them.  
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

On Independence Day, we often reflect upon the greatness of our nation and the miracle of its founding. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.”<sup>i</sup> He made that observation after spending ten months between 1831 and 1832 traveling around a relatively new America.

He was a young man on a bit of a boondoggle: a “mission” that was being paid for by the French government to study the American penal system, which was, at the time, considered very progressive. So he, along with his life-long friend, Gustave de Beaumont, wrangled a grant to do an investigative study, which he completed.

But the greater accomplishment, and apparently his primary intention all along, was to come to America to catalog what De Tocqueville observed about democracy in general and about Americans in particular. He wrote a book in two volumes about his travels titled *Democracy in America*, a seminal work in the fields of sociology and political science. De Tocqueville’s writings offer an early view of what America looked like to someone from beyond its borders.

Harvey Mansfield writes, “He came to America, as he put it, in search of an ‘image of democracy itself.’” As the land where democracy was most advanced and most perfected, America offered a unique opportunity to portray the great “democratic revolution” under way in the West. De Tocqueville’s “‘America’ was, thus, the singular case study for the interpretation of modern democracy, and his ‘Americans’ (were) the outstanding example of democratic citizens.”<sup>iii</sup>

So, after he arrived in New York City, what did he discover? Mansfield says, “Above all, De Tocqueville points to American religion as a crucial check on the excesses of democratic individualism. According to De Tocqueville, American religion teaches, as the Puritan founder John Winthrop put it, that ‘freedom’ means the freedom to do *only* what is just. This serves as a vital check on the individualistic impulse of the democratic man and offers a fixed moral orientation. It fights against materialism as well as the view that man is completely alone and must decide what is permitted or not permitted according to his own lights.”<sup>iii</sup>

On our best days, we pray this might all be true. I'm not sure we're as confident today as De Tocqueville was about the influence of American religion to curb the individualistic and materialistic impulses of our fellow citizens. We would, however, certainly hope to believe our greatness lies in our ability to repair our faults, because there seem to be so very many faults to be repaired.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses told the citizens of Israel what they needed to know about their God. First, that this God was no Canaanite facsimile, no cheap knock-off of the real thing. This was "the God of Gods, the Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome!" This is "your praise," he told them. This is the God "who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen." This is the God who won't be bribed and can't be fooled.

And what does this God want? What does this God require? We are to care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. And why, precisely, is that? Because they're in the greatest need of our help. Who does this God love? Who does this God express partiality towards? The orphan. The widow. The stranger. You seek to be a nation of the righteous? You want to be a people who please God? Then you've got to get these basic facts down, because these these are the fundamental, non-negotiable ideals of the God of great and awesome things.

This God is telling us, You've got to remember where you came from, because *you* were once "strangers in a strange land." *You* were once immigrants. *You* were once vulnerable and weak and at the mercy of others. *You* were once so poor that you had nothing but hope in your stomachs. Don't you *ever* forget that! God says, I do not choose people of this nation or of that nation! I choose children without parents or families. I choose women without families or means of support. I choose strangers, aliens, immigrant who have come from a long way off and who have no one to look out for them but you. So, if the fights we are currently having are about *who* America is and *what we most value* as a nation, then I believe these are the fights worth having.

The Letter to the Hebrews, attributed to the Apostle Paul, recalls the story of Abraham and Sarah, who through their faith in God received the inheritance of a new nation. They set out, "not knowing where they were going," or where they would end up. They lived in tents and wandered in a foreign land for years. By faith they obeyed, by faith they stayed in the land they had been promised, by faith they received God's power and blessing. They were well past the age where they could expect to have children, and yet, and yet, God blessed them with descendants, "as many as the stars of heaven." They were seeking their homeland, not just an earthly country but a heavenly one. The author of Hebrew's, noting their faith, writes, "God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." A beautiful, glorious city; a city upon a hill.

The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, was preaching on July 2, 1630. He and his Puritan immigrants were still aboard the *Arbella*, the ship upon which they had made their Atlantic crossing, as the ship lay anchored in Boston Harbor. He told his fellow Puritans that they would have to work hard in this new land, sacrificing their own personal desires for the good of the community and for the sake of their religion, "For" as he preached, "we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."<sup>iv</sup>

Winthrop said we shall be "as a City upon a hill." He didn't say we would "build" this city. He didn't even say it was "a shining city," although American presidents since have enjoyed making that addition to his oration. His sermon, perhaps the most famous lay sermon ever delivered in this country, was not a call to American exceptionalism or triumphalism, but a call to humility and to service and to self-sacrifice.

Winthrop knew people around the world would be watching this American experiment, and, more importantly, he knew that the God upon whom all their successes depended would be watching as well. A city on a hill has nowhere to hide.<sup>v</sup>

I was raised in a home where we proudly flew the American flag on all the major national holidays. The Fourth of July was a big summer celebration in Centerville, Ohio; a day off from work with hamburgers and hotdogs on the grill and my mother's made-from-scratch potato salad. In the morning we went to see the Independence Day parade, featuring every piece of fire-fighting equipment that could be assembled from a three-township radius. When night fell, we went to see the fireworks: swirling, whistling fingers of light slicing through the darkness, exploding into heavenly shapes and colors, and punctuated at the end by those giant booms which shook the frame houses on our street (and traumatized every dog in the neighborhood).

In hindsight, ours was a low-key, realistic patriotism: a love of country similar to one's love for a family member. It was based on knowing all of their flaws (as well as their possibilities for greatness) and loving them anyway. It was also a patriotism painfully unaware of Fredrick Douglass' fiery 4<sup>th</sup> of July address reminding the white citizenry of America that this Independence Day celebration didn't appear to be intended for African-Americans, most of whom were still enslaved when our constitution was written—a document which, by the way, granted them no legal rights, no vote, and, for political purposes, counted them as only three-fifths of a white person. Native Americans, of course, were certainly in no better situation, killed by the thousands and run off all the lands white settlers most coveted.

The America my family celebrated on Independence Day was a place where poor Scots-Irish and German immigrants could work hard and achieve something their European ancestors could not have imagined possible. The American Dream was not something improbable for them because they had experienced it in their own ways, and they knew enough not to ask too much from it.

But as we celebrate our 245<sup>th</sup> Independence Day today, we might do well to ask about the exclusivity of this independence. We might broaden our perspectives by asking, "Independence for whom? And from what?" The Christian faith forces us to ask hard questions like these.

Charles de Gaulle famously said that "Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first. Nationalism is when hatred for people other than your own comes first."<sup>vi</sup> Watching the rise of Nazi Germany on his Eastern border, he had a front row seat on the damage a radical Nationalism can create. The unholy convergence of Christianity and Nationalism in our country should be of concern to every Christian citizen. The rise of this movement in the United States should horrify us.

The American journalist Sydney J. Harris wrote, "The difference between patriotism and nationalism is that the patriot is proud of his country for what it does, and the nationalist is proud of his country no matter what it does; the first attitude creates a feeling of responsibility, but the second a feeling of blind arrogance that leads to war."<sup>vii</sup>

Over the years, I've felt the full range of emotions in relationship to my country. Pride, embarrassment, disappointment, satisfaction, hope, fear, optimism. My travels abroad made me feel more deeply American than I had ever felt growing-up in the heartland of our nation. When you live or travel abroad, you're more conscious of both the great privilege and the great weight of being an American in the world. You see more clearly the great potential our vast power holds, and you're all the more disappointed when that power doesn't appear to be wielded for the highest and holiest purposes.

Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate for President who lost both the 1952 and the 1956 Presidential elections, observed, "Patriotism is not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and

steady dedication of a lifetime.”<sup>viii</sup> That seems just about right to me. It is often slow going. We work for change. We vote. We serve. We advocate. We vision. We work towards greater justice and equality. We are thwarted. We become disappointed. We start over again. Patriotism, at least for Christian Americans, should be less a denial of our nation’s faults than a passion for addressing and overcoming them. As British statesman James Bryce wrote, “Patriotism consists not in (simply) waving the flag, but in striving that your country shall be righteous as well as strong.”<sup>ix</sup> Righteous as well as strong.

When we read the words of Jesus in the gospel appointed for today it is clear that the ethic of love is our guide to becoming a righteous nation. We may love our country, but we must love God more. We may love our nation, but we must love our fellow citizens more. And we must, in particular, love those who are hard to love, even, or especially, those who do not love us in return.

There are two common views of America’s future. The most common one is the dark, pessimistic view leading to a dystopian future. Climate change, growing economic disparity, the rise of corporations, political polarization, racial inequity, increasing social alienation, all taking place while China and Russia, our super-competitors on the world’s stage, appear to be patiently waiting for us to make a critical miscalculation. Some believe that, like the Romans before us, we are on the brink of the fall of the empire.

I was traveling in Zambia, representing the Episcopal Church at a celebration marking the 100-year anniversary of the Anglican Church in that country. We were headed to the cathedral in Lusaka when I noticed a number of signs in front of building projects boasting Chinese economic investment. When I spoke to a local businessman about it, he told me, “You Americans have a 5-year economic plan. The Chinese have a 50-year economic plan.” We often fear falling behind our international rivals, economically or militarily, but if we fall behind them morally, ethically, spiritually, of what good then will our riches or our mighty power be?

I hold a greater hope for our nation and I do not believe my hope is held in vain. It was Saint Augustine who said, “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.”<sup>x</sup> That sounds like a pretty good recipe for life, as well as a recipe for faithful citizenship to me.

“The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults.” In a democracy, we possess the ability to repair the faults of a nation over time. It’s important work because the world needs to be able to look at our “city on a hill” and find hope in its aspirations to care first for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.

Of course, it won’t be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, 1805-1859, French Foreign Minister & Writer, *Democracy in America, Volume I*, 1835, as cited on [www.quote.org](http://www.quote.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Harvey Mansfield, *Tocqueville: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2011

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel T. Rogers, *As A City On A Hill; The Story of America’s Most Famous Lay Sermon*, Princeton University Press, c. 2018

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

<sup>vi</sup> Charles De Gaulle, 1890-1970, French President, Quoted in *Life*, May 9, 1969, as cited on [www.quote.org](http://www.quote.org)

<sup>vii</sup> Sydney Harris, 1917-1986, American journalist, *Strictly Personal*, H. Regnery Company, 1953, as cited on [www](http://www)

<sup>viii</sup> Adlai Stevenson mid-20th-century Governor of Illinois and Ambassador to the UN 1900 - 1965 Speech to the American Legion convention, New York City (27 August 1952); as quoted in "Democratic Candidate Adlai Stevenson Defines the Nature of Patriotism" in *Lend Me Your Ears : Great Speeches In History* (2004) by William Safire, p. 79 - 80, cited on [www.quote.org](http://www.quote.org)

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<sup>ix</sup> James Bryce, 1st Viscount Bryce British academic, jurist, historian and Liberal politician 1838 - 1922, as cited on  
www.quotepark.com

<sup>x</sup> Copied, source unknown

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