

*God Bless America*  
Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral  
Mark 6.1-14

I once had a homework assignment as a child. One of the questions was "Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?" Rather than do my reading, I thought I would ask my great-aunt Gladys for the answer. So I asked her, "Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?" She said, "At the bottom."

Sunshine Cathedral shares several members with MCC-Toronto.

About 1/3 of our membership is Jamaican.

We have guests almost every week from nations throughout the world, and people all over the world watch our sermons and read our literature and ask us to pray with them.

Because of our international church family, and because the kingdom is global, I strongly resist nationalism in the house of prayer...Scripture tells us the worship space is to be a house of prayer for ALL peoples (Isaiah).

And yet on this day, I do want to highlight the U.S.'s potential, its promise, its successes, and at the same time I must remember that much of what is good about the US is good because courageous people have always spoken out against what was not yet good so the country they loved might be even better.

As a citizen of this country I want my nation to prosper and flourish, but God forbid that I ever think that we are somehow God's special chosen people...we must claim our sacred value, but never at the expense of anyone else's.

Now, let's be clear. I'm glad that separation of church and state means that government cannot privilege one religion or speak against anyone's religion, and religion shouldn't flaunt symbols of state as if to suggest that they have religious value. But to speak about one's country, to honestly address its strengths and weaknesses, and to call the congregation to pray for it and other countries as well...that, I believe, is entirely appropriate. And each week at Communion, we do pray for the leaders of this and every country.

After all, to speak about the bible is to speak about nations and governments. Prophets standing up to kings, Jesus being tried and executed as a revolutionary...that's our biblical story. We have books of the bible titled "Kings" and "Numbers" (as in census), and "Judges" and the first five books of our bible are called the books of the "Law." If we take politics out of the bible, we won't have much bible left to discuss.

Moreover, I recognize that the Independence of a great nation offers hope and inspiration and I am in the hope and inspiration business.

So, after much thought, prayer, and deliberation, I have chosen to honor the country of my birth not with empty praise, but with truth about the greatness it has known, and the goodness to which it must still aspire. And, as a person of faith, I also want to pray for my country, wishing it not only peace and prosperity, but also integrity, health, and the will to be as great as its promise.

Our ancestors rejected the colonialism of British Empire, but they betrayed the indigenous people of this land.

They declared all men are created equal...but they meant only men, and only free men, and only white free men. They preached equality while denying the vote to women and while allowing the enslavement of their fellow human-beings.

This country bravely defended its borders and territories against a threatening Japanese Empire in WW2; but out of fear of their enemy they denied liberty to loyal Japanese Americans as they put them in internment camps because of their heritage.

This country stood up to the evil of Hitler's anti-Semitic, racist Third Reich; but has since rushed to other wars that did not have the same moral justification.

And in this country, we pledge allegiance to a republic that is one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all; but as of this moment, GLBT people are not universally included in that "all".

We each love this country, whether we are citizens or guests. But we love it from our experience of it; and we must never forget that some of us have enjoyed more privilege, more opportunities than others. So we can't dismiss those who call for change as being malcontents, or unpatriotic. They may be the greatest of patriots, taking great risks to make sure that the American dream is not for a few, or even for just the majority, but truly for all people.

The Reverend William Sloane Coffin, a protestant minister known for his years as a chaplain at Yale University and later as the pastor of Riverside Church in New York, preached a sermon a few years ago where he said there are three kinds of patriots. The first kind is the patriot who is an uncritical lover of the country. They turn symbols of state into idols of veneration and they will not listen to the voices of those who have been left out of the American experiment or who have ideas of how to make a great nation even better. These uncritical patriots don't help their country get better, because they are not willing to see where their country needs improvement.

The second kind of patriot, Coffin said, is the patriot who is a loveless critic. Coffin said you have to hate what is wrong with the country you love so that you can help heal what is wrong. But if you hate what's wrong more than you love what's right, you become bitter...you become a good hater, but not a good patriot.

The third kind of patriot, Coffin insisted, is the patriot who loves his or her country enough to hold it accountable, to address its flaws because this patriot knows how great the country can be and ought to be. It's like Mark Twain said, "Patriotism means being loyal to your country all the time, and to its government when it deserves it."

Let's be clear...patriotism is not nationalism. Nationalism is just another prejudice, like sexism or racism or classism...it says "we" are superior to "them." Nationalism is the misguided belief that one's nation is God's chosen among all nations. But patriotism is a genuine love of country, and love always has room for more. Good patriots may love their country first, but not only. Pablos Casals once said, "To love one's country is a wonderful thing, but why should love stop at the border?" If French Canadian Celene Dion can lovingly ask God to bless us, perhaps we can be just as gracious.

Our readings today are about healing. In the gospel lesson, Jesus raises his prophetic voice, but in his own community he isn't heard. He isn't taken seriously. He is dismissed as being pretentious, or crazy, or unqualified to speak to his neighbors. But those few who would listen experienced healing in their lives, and Jesus took his prophetic message on the road where he would be heard and could make a difference. Prophets always call a people to their high potential; they address weakness so that they may be replaced with health and strength. They use their courage to help heal the wounds of apathy and injustice. And as they do, individuals and societies are healed along the way.

And so, in the prophetic tradition, I recognize this country's great promise and potential; and I call us to work together to help it be all that it can be. But let us remember the US isn't the only country in the world; it isn't even the only country in this church.

May we love this country so much that we won't settle for it being less than it can be. May our love of country be so genuine, that our love doesn't stop at the borders. May we love this country enough to challenge it when it is wrong, and to praise it when it is right, and to pray for it at all times.

And so my prayer today is for the health of America.

God bless America to reflect not its own glory, but the glory of God's realm where neither race nor religion nor economic status nor gender identity nor sexual orientation nor geographic border are ever used to oppress or exclude any person.

God bless America not to privilege some but to promote liberty and justice for all.

God bless America to be generous with her friends and forgiving of her enemies.

God bless America not to forget the mistakes of her past, but to atone for them so that she can be a leader with genuine moral authority in the community of nations.

God bless America, not because she's perfect but because she is good and can be better.

God bless America, not because she has lived fully into her promise, but because she still can.

God bless America, not exclusively, but to show all nations and all people that God's blessing is ever available to them all.

God bless America, not because she is weak, but so her strength will be used wisely.

God bless America to be a blessing to the whole world. Amen.

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God is giving me hope.  
God is giving me strength.  
God is giving me wisdom.  
God is blessing me to bless others.  
Thank you, God!  
Amen.