

A sermon preached by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 6, 2008, dedicated to the founders of our nation on this 232nd birthday, and always to the glory of God!

“If I Were a Christian in America”

Daniel, 3:16-18; Luke, 4:14-21

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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I love Independence Day, July 4, 1776. I love the American Dream it set in motion! Having grown up in Philadelphia (the cradle of liberty), and having graduated High School in the class of 1976 – our nation’s Bicentennial year – and having worked and spoken nationally in 1975-76 on behalf of the American Bicentennial Commission, I fell in love at an early age with the Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Adams and Mr. Washington. I believed the American Dream was for everyone.

The substance of the dream is expressed in these sublime words, lifted to cosmic proportions. 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.
(Martin Luther King Jr., *The American Dream*, 1961)

This is the dream! This dream is amazingly universal. It says “all men,” which I would edit to read: “All men and women.” It does not say only white men, but all men and women, which includes all people of color! It doesn’t say Gentiles, but all men and women, which includes Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Spiritualists, agnostics, atheists and others. It doesn’t say straight “men and women” – just ALL! **We are all created equal! That’s what the dreamers wrote!** Our Creator (not “Father” or “God”) has “endowed” us with rights that are inalienable. These rights are “Creator” given and undeniable – **“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”**

Can these truths be more self-evident? Our “American Dream” became a star cast into the vastness of the unknown universe and in time this dream began to burn brightly in the hearts and minds of Americans. This dream fired-up a revolution and changed the world. I love this noble dream and I always will!

Two-hundred and thirty-two years later, we aren’t asked how do we hold these truths to be self-evident. We are asked: “Are you a patriot?” In Ohio, my colleagues and I are asked by the Reformation Ohio leaders: “Are you a Patriot Pastor?” I have three answers: “I am a patriot. I am a pastor. But, I will never be one of your ‘Patriot Pastors.’ ”

As a patriot and a pastor, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, writes in *Credo*:

There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world (p. 84).

When there's doubt, there's more considered faith. Likewise, when citizens doubt, patriotism becomes more informed. For Christians to render everything to Caesar – their minds, their consciences – is to become more evangelical nationalists. That's not a distortion of the gospel, that's desertion . . . It's wonderful to love one's country; but faith is for God. National unity too is wonderful - but not in cruelty and folly (p. 81).

Today, I ask myself: **“What if I were a Christian in America?”** Some may think this question unpatriotic. But I say, as an American patriot, I have to ask this question every day in order to live into my baptismal vows to God. To answer this question, I'll take my lead from a young dreamer, a carpenter in Nazareth – you know, Joseph's boy – who as he hit 30 and hit the road might have asked himself: **“What if I were a Jew in Palestine?”**

Having been baptized by John in the Jordan, having faced 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus comes home to the synagogue for Sabbath services. There he stands and reads from the scrolls of the Prophet Isaiah and delivers what was to become his inaugural sermon. Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has

sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

With these words, our young Nazarene preacher steps into the midst of his "beloved community" and declares his five-point mission for being a faithful Jew in his Palestinian homeland. He will live out the mission of justice and righteousness by: 1) Preaching good news and deliverance to the poor; 2) Freeing those who are captive; 3) Recovering the sight of the blind; 4) Freeing ALL who are oppressed; 5) proclaiming the year of liberation, the year of Jubilee – which is the year of the Lord's favor!

His is a biblical theology centered in the word of God and the prophets of old! His dream is grounded in a faith of the ages and a salvation of the poor and oppressed, not a money-making scheme for his "Jesus" empire.

When Jesus' moment arrives, he stands up and starts to be counted among great leaders of history in this liturgical "coming out" party. He not only reads his declaration of independence from Isaiah's ancient writings, but he fearlessly steps into living Isaiah's radical prophetic vision! This is biblical theology at work!

By so doing, he boldly merges the Word and the Work of Justice and Righteousness! He acknowledges that only God is sovereign! Only God can turn the world upside down and inside out. Only God can issue inalienable rights like "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." But, Jesus also knows that his creator needs all the help God can get to make it happen!

To be a Jew in Palestine, a peasant prophet in this Mediterranean malaise, Jesus demonstrates – what else – love of God, love of self and love of neighbor. He has a clear sense of whose he is and who he is. He has a purpose driven life and lives it.

In a society that consumes, collects, counts individualistic blessings and is usurped by a creed of greed, we are called as people of faith to live in community, look out for neighbor, count our blessings for the whole practice a creed of love for God, neighbor and self. **Can you and I be Christians in America?**

Before I finally answer the question “**Can I be a Christian in America?**” let’s get a few more directions on how to do this from yet three more great and faithful Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

In Daniel 3, when these three are forced to worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s idols or die in the flames of the King’s furnace, the three respond:

If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire about out of your hand, O King, let him deliver us. But, if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up (Daniel 3: 16-19).

Message to the king: We will be faithful to our God and God only. It may mean facing death, but even if our God doesn’t deliver us from the flames of hell, we will not do what you tell us to do! A witness of faith doesn’t yield to the

threats of kings, if those threats are unjust and unjustifiable and not “OF GOD!” Stepping into the furnace and trusting God to deliver you from the fire! Now that’s faith and it’s clarity of purpose in the face of injustice.

As Christians in America, we need to acknowledge the heat rising and the hurricanes striking us this fourth of July weekend. The hurricane is named poverty. Although it is quiet storm, it is sweeping across this county, this state, my state, all of our states and nation. Poverty is devastating one household after another. One in three Ohioans lives below the poverty level! This is sinful!

Today, the working poor in the richest nation on the earth can’t make ends meet. They can’t make ends meet, not because they are bad, or wasteful, or lazy, but because their wages are too low. Most workers are making less today when their wages are adjusted for inflation than they were in 1950.

Many full-time working Americans cannot meet their basic needs, often forced to choose between feeding their families or heating their homes. These Americans are members of our faith communities. Some of them are your family members. Others are your friends and co-workers. Many of you work in buildings which they care for and clean.

As a nation, WE must make some critical decisions in the coming years. We must decide to get serious about the greatest moral issues facing our society: Poverty and her twin intolerance, and the crying need of equality for all people.

We need to decide what we believe. What truths do we hold to be self-evident? What are we as Christians living in America willing to stand for?

I am ready to answer my question. I believe more deeply than anything in my DNA or bones, I am a Christian living in America. I love God and Christ and I love this nation of ours. No “if’s” or “buts.”

Because I am a Christian in this great nation, I, for one, need to step up, step out, speak out, and organize (you knew that was coming) with others of ALL FAITHS who are living in our land.

As a Christian in America, I believe that a Social Security card is not a private portfolio statement, but a membership ticket in a society where we all contribute to a common treasury so that none face the indignities of poverty in old age.

I believe that tax evasion is not a form of conserving investment capital, but a brazen abandonment of responsibility to our country.

I believe income inequality is not a sign of freedom of opportunity at work, because, it persists and grows, and unless you believe that some should be masters and others slaves, it’s a sign that opportunity is less than equal.

I believe that self-interest is a great motivator for production and progress, but self-interest is amoral unless contained within the framework of social justice for all people.

I believe that public services, when privatized, serve those who can afford them and eventually weaken the sense that we all rise and fall together as “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

I believe that prosperity requires good wages and benefits for workers. I also believe the best place to see this belief come to fruition is in my church and in your church! What better places to offer good wages and benefits than in the churches we hold near and dear!

I believe we can no longer treat Mother Earth like a punching ball. We can't strip her, rape her and leave her to die and expect her not to respond with the wrath and power we see in her climatic changes, devastating coastal storms, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and earthquakes that are leaving the human race and all creation wondering what hit them and how they will live in the aftermath.

I believe that our nation can no more survive as half democracy and half oligarchy than it could survive as half slave and half free, and that keeping it from becoming all oligarchy is steady work. It is the work that God has set before us in the church and in society. (Many of my belief statements have been adapted from Bill Moyers, *Moyers on America*, Random House, 2005, pp. 44-45).

I believe we have reached the breaking point in this country in which you and I must do everything in our power to stop the unmitigated verbal, physical and economic attacks on gays and Muslims and other peoples of faith – which are coming predominately from people who call themselves “Christians.” I might remind you that these same

“Christians” refer to the Jesus we believe in as “wimpy and weak.”

In fact, I believe anyone who speaks hatefully, no matter how they cover it over, is not worthy to bear the name of Jesus Christ. These verbal and physical attacks are horrific and must stop because injustice anywhere is an assault on justice everywhere.

The days ahead will not be without struggle. But, if we believe in the American Dream and we hope to live into our Christian faith, none of us will stand on the sidelines any longer. I, for one, don't want to hear the voice of God asking, *“Timothy, why are you silent when your sisters and brothers are suffering?”*

I do not want my generation to be counted among those who did not know the voice of God. Like Samuel, we need to listen and respond when God calls (and I believe God is calling): *“Here I am. Speak, O Lord, for your servant is listening!”*

If we do not answer God, we will have to answer not only to our children and their generation, the millions of soldiers through the ages who sacrificed their last ounce of courage in war fighting for freedom, the innocents who have died in war beside them, the prophets of old who have cried to us across the ages and cry to us still, to Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Adams, Mr. Washington, Martin and Daniel, but also to Jesus!

Ultimately, we will have to answer to our sovereign God when God asks (And God WILL ASK!): *“Why were you silent? Why did you not act? For that is why I placed you on the*

planet!”

As Christians in America, let us live like it from this Independence Day until our final breath when at last we are truly free! Amen.

