

Lectionary 14 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 4, 2021

2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Occasional: Independence Day

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

There's a great [YouTube video](#) of "America the Beautiful" being led by Garrison Keillor. It was recorded eleven years ago in the summer of 2010 as an encore to a staging of "A Prairie Home Companion," at the Tanglewood outdoor pavilion in western Massachusetts. In this encore, Garrison Keillor gets the entire audience to sing all four verses. Most Americans know the first verse from memory. As Keillor says, we learned it in third grade. And then he calls out the words to each of the subsequent verses. And he makes a couple of interesting mistakes as he does so.

But despite the mistakes, it's a good example of Garrison Keillor's particular genius. Keillor understands that civic singing has almost entirely disappeared from American life. Americans used to sing songs whenever they gathered in public. At parades and at picnics. In bars and in union halls. Secular singing. And that has disappeared from American public life. The national anthem is still sung before sporting events. But unfortunately the nature of "O Say Can You See" is that it is really, truly hard to sing. And so it has become more of something that is performed. And because it has become a performance, it has easily become politicized and divisive at football games. Baseball games still have the seventh inning stretch, and a chance to sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." But that's about the extent of civic singing in America anymore.

So Garrison Keillor understands that that is missing. And his former radio show usually required some audience singing. Observers have marveled at his ability to coax a theater full of New Yorkers into singing "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." Keillor has a really good ear for what is singable, and he is able to tap into the American memory and the American unconscious and draw us out into singing again. And if you go online and watch this particular [YouTube video](#), you'll see him in action, doing what seldom can be done in America anymore, what only Keillor seems to be able to do.

Now "A Prairie Home Companion" is gone, and so is its successor, "Live From Here." And with culture wars raging around the national anthem and football games, churches may be the only remaining places in America where people come together and sing collectively. Some churches today will sing a bunch of patriotic songs. Some churches have a thin boundary between their identity and their mission and the nation's identity and the nation's mission. This church tradition and this congregation have a robust boundary between our identity and our mission and the nation's identity and the nation's mission. But we have a few national songs in our hymnal, and I

think it is highly appropriate that we have “America the Beautiful.” And that we sing it today at the conclusion of worship.

Katherine Bates wrote this song. If you asked most Americans about their favorite patriotic song, they would name one written by a man: “The Star Spangled Banner” by Francis Scott Key. Which most men cannot sing. It was designed for Mariah Carey, as near as I can tell, two hundred years before she was born. Or “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin. Somewhat more singable, especially if you are Kate Smith. But it took a woman to write a song that we could sing. Actually, a man named Samuel Ward wrote the notes. And it was actually a church hymn first. Ward was an organist and choir director. Which is probably why mortal human beings can sing it.

Katherine Bates wrote the words. She was from New England. And in the summer of 1893, she was on a group trip to Colorado. And she began to write the hymn while she was on top of Pike’s Peak. Having traveled across America to get to Colorado, she had stopped in Chicago for the World’s Fair, which was called the White City. And that’s how we get “alabaster cities” in our final verse. And she took a train across Kansas on her way west. Which is how we get “amber waves of grain.” It was very much inspired by the landscape as she experienced it, and as many of us experience it today, nearly 130 years later.

Our hymnal, like most contemporary hymnals, leaves out part of the the second verse. Which speaks about pilgrim feet beating a thoroughfare through the wilderness. This is understood by some hymnal editors to be insensitive to the history of Native Americans. For white people, it was a wilderness to be overcome. But natives, it was beautiful and it was their home. In a way, I wish that the editors had let the original text stand. They ended up merging the second part of the second verse with the first part of the third verse, and it’s successful. But Katherine Bates did not just rush this hymn into print. She revised it and improved it over several years. In any event, the middle stanza of our hymn, which was two stanzas in her hymn, was concerned with the past. And then the final stanza is concerned with the future. There is a logic to the sequence of verses in the song, that expresses gratitude for God’s grace in the past, and the hope for God’s grace to bring us to a better future.

If you watch the [YouTube video](#), you’ll see that Garrison Keillor sings verse one, then verse four, then verse three, then verse two. So much for the logic! He’s worse than our hymnal editors! But the song functions as a prayer about God’s grace and mercy, and points toward the future. Which is one reason that we won’t sing it now, but at the end of worship today. Those alabaster cities that she had seen imagined at the world’s fair on Chicago. A future dream, a patriot dream, that sees beyond the years, and sees a future undimmed by human tears.

Our assigned scripture readings for today were created by global Christianity, not by American Christianity. So they have nothing to do with Independence Day. Indeed, they are a terrible mismatch for the Declaration of Independence. They are texts that speak to the ignorance of the people. The prophet Ezekiel and the Christ Jesus ignored and rejected by the people to whom

they are sent. These are not scriptures that affirm self-determination or freedom or national pride. The Bible was not written to affirm the United States of America. Nor was it written to critique or condemn the United States of America. It is unwise and perhaps a bit dangerous to try to perfectly align the Bible with any nation. The Bible is about God and the whole human race, and any alignment with a particular nation is an accident after the fact.

But our second reading today, apart from any national agenda, commends a Christian attitude of personal humility. Our second reading is well known as a text about God's grace. *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. I will not boast, except of my weakness.* I think that Katherine Bates had that kind of Christian character, or at least her most famous writing does. In her song, heroes are people who love mercy more than life. In her song, we acknowledge that our nation has faults, and we pray that God will mend them. Her song consistently echoes a theme that Lutheran Christians hear a great deal: God has been gracious to us, so we should do better to others. God shed his grace on thee. Now crown that good with brotherhood. God is good. Our response to his goodness should be appropriate to that grace. And our response is directed toward our sisters and brothers, which at the turn of the last century was called "brotherhood."

For all people of the world, the last eighteen months have been difficult. Americans have not been spared by the pandemic that has affected all nations. In some ways, we have been fortunate to have stronger health care systems, and better resources than many, many others lands and peoples. But the crisis has also laid bare the weaknesses of our society. I hope that for me and for you and for many Americans, we have a chance to celebrate today, to relax, and to enjoy our blessings. Our sending song at the end of this service patriotically reminds us that we are blessed by grace, and that with that grace comes a responsibility to acknowledge our flaws, to do well by others. And to dream of a future America undimmed by human tears. For Christians, an even better heavenly city someday, where God will wipe away every tear. Amen.