

*The Bicentennial Sermon, Chappaqua NY United Church of Christ
4 July 76, the nation's 200th birthday
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*Text: Micah 6:6-8, which permeated the liturgy, which was an adaptation of
an ecumenical liturgy for the day, used in thousands of churches*

"SHOULD A NATION HAVE THE SOUL OF A CHURCH?"

SISTERS AND BROTHERS, the terms of the sermon title come from the title of a book by an old friend of mine, Sid Mead, now dean of American church historians. His booktitle, A NATION WITH THE SOUL OF A CHURCH, presents his life-work thesis, viz. that almost unique among the nations, ours began virtually as a church; or to put it more precisely, a people whose corporate soul-quality was religious; and this church-soul quality of our American experience is the central clue for understanding both our strengths and our weaknesses, our virtues and our shortfallings. This sermon invites you to meditate on relationships within the triangle of the three words: "soul," "nation," and "church." Instead of striving for a neat answer to the sermon title's question, I hope to be of help to you as on this, our 200th birthday, we engage in solemn searching out of our personal and corporate responsibilities for today and tomorrow. God grant us this at the beginning of this sobering, joyful day, which John Adams invited us to celebrate with "solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty" and with "pomp and parade, ...bells, bonfires and illuminations."...To come at the sermon aim in another way: We as a people were soul before we got a body. Before we became, 200 years ago today, a people politically on our own, we had been for 1 1/2 centuries a people with the soul of a church. Remembering, now, this central fact and character of our historic life, let's think about how this soul now fares within and among us, and about its future, which is the only part of history we can make. Can we, and if so should we, continue to have the soul of a church, and if so what "church," devotion to what--and at what specific costs in personal and communal self-discipline, and at what perils? [Both the costs and the perils come to mind as we re-hear the famous quotation from deTocqueville, a reflection on his visit here from France almost 1 1/2 centuries ago: "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in fertile fields and boundless forests; it was not there. I sought for it in her free schools and her institutions of learning; it was not there. I sought for it in her matchless Constitution and democratic congress; it was not there. Not until I went to the churches and temples of America and found them aflame with righteousness did I understand the greatness and genius of America. America is great because America is good. When America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." Well, now that we have become great, have we remained good. Or did we become great by being good or by being both that and something else? And shall we remain great, whether good or not? What now is our soul, and how shall we call it to account before the bar of our past and the bar of the world's future?

This is the Bicentennial sermon in the Bicentennial worship--among many worships, sermons, addresses in this Bicentennial year. Looking toward all this public worship, I as a member of our Bicentennial committee wrote our chair, Bud Quinby, last October, expressing three concerns: "First, radicals want to use the Bicentennial to put down America, and reactionaries to put up America, and I think both are to be avoided as put-ons, i.e. bad trips laid on us. In the churches, we are more apt to commit the latter obscenity than the former: I'm worried about that. The Christian faith and church are for the praise of

God, not chauvinism [the praise of nation]. Second, the biblical-prophetic way of seeing and living in the world transcends the polarities, such as radical/ reactionary, while affirming the creative tension within and between them. This perspective, in Bicentennial worship, should be dominant, illuminating both what's been right with America and what's been wrong, what now is right and what now is wrong, and what potential we have for evil [the arrogance of power, the anxiety about privilege, the fear about retaining wealth, materialistic lust, spiritual neglect] and for good [proved powers of self-discipline toward idealistic ends, eagerness for change that promises improvement, generosity in the crises of persons and peoples]. Third, since the Kingdom of God is here and now and at the same time not yet, the Bicentennial should look at the church, ecclesial institutions, both as divinely set over against all other institutions [not just "church and state" but also "church against state"] and as failed approximations of divine-human community. About the former, we should be firm: about the latter, penitent, humble, open, prayerful, eager for the better ways and forms.

As I speak to you now, the tall ships are nostalgically sailing into our city's port: the past is present; and the tallest ship ever, Viking I, is sailing 'round Mars on landing course: the future, too, is with us. And here we are, strung out between ships old and new in our bewildering present on this shrinking planet whose biosphere is being polluted and whose resources diminished and whose nations are both fragmenting and forming into geopolitical clusters and whose economy is both multinationalizing and tribalizing and whose cultures are interpenetrating and self-isolating and disintegrating and reforming....what now is our responsibility as American citizens "under God" as we are being forced to lower our political and economic expectations and raise our respect for the limits which God, both through nature and through the rest of humanity, is pressing upon us?

Now, I need not dwell on the particular hypocrisies of our two sets of founding parents, the New England set and the Philadelphia set; or on the ironies of our national history; or on the present painful contradictions between our professed ideals of freedom and equality and our realities of race, class, sex, and money. I am more sad than angry that we have so betrayed ourselves, and more penitent than sad--for penitence adds to sadness the hope of divine forgiveness and renewal. And I refuse to sin by quelling the music in my heart in thanksgiving to God for this our 200th birthday. But I must not refrain from remarking a central sadness in our recent history: Since the American invasion of Siberia the year I was born, 1918, our nation has been consistently treasonous to its own revolutionary past in a foreign policy stubbornly, almost mindlessly counterrevolutionary, with such bad fruits as China, Containment, McCarthyism, Vietnam, Watergate, Chile, and Angola. Yet our unfaithfulness to our revolutionary heritage has not abolished the principle of liberty out of which our national power arose; and shame and guilt and embarrassment over our betrayal of that principle, at home and abroad, should not obscure the light of that principle, which continues its rightful demands upon our hearts and its promises to the world. In this Bicentennial worship this morning we seek to honor the proper tension between that penitence and that promise, and so prepare ourselves for the duties, sorrows, and joys to come.

Hear the scripture, Micah 6:6-8, the Old Testament's supreme summary of the prophetic message and thus at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity: "...what does the Lord require of you, O people, but to do justice, to love compassion, and to walk in humble, eager openness with your God?" It's a court scene. My father, at supper after returning from his court, would often quote it to remind himself and his family who the Judge is, the Judge of the judge. The people's profligacy has made them fat and sassy, and so amnesiac about the Covenant, the society's formative principle of order, and about the Covenant Partner, the Lord of heaven and earth. [The chastened and restrained mood of the Bicentennial across our nation seems to show that while we are still fat, we are no longer so sassy.] Thus the people have obscured the promise, and now, in court, try to bribe the

Judge first with small offerings and then escalating all the way up to human sacrifice, "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul," but the Judge will have none of it. Rather, he calls them through penitence to return to the promise's purity and simplicity. Note, in the text, that justice is to be DONE, not just talked about: in our Declaration of Independence, God's justice is the basis not only of political reason but also of political action. And compassion is to be LOVED, not just felt and sentimentalized over; and God is to be WALKED WITH ["walk" in Hebrew implying total conduct, ethics in the whole of life], not just theorized and argued about. In the high compaction of only nineteen words in Hebrew, these assumptions obtain: God loves his people, enters into covenant with them, is faithful to his side of the compact, requires that we conform to his character as holy love and walk with him in humble openness to his will, which is our highest good; when through disobedience we distance ourselves from him, he calls us to repent--literally, in Hebrew, "return"--for he has "compassion" on us, his "grace" [the New Testament word parallel to the Hebrew word here] yearns to forgive us and reestablish us in the relationship. Nothing that we HAVE and so might offer can close the gap and thus restore the relationship; only what we ARE, offered toward what we should BECOME. No mere liturgical action can get the job done; we must have character, and even such virtue is nothing in itself, an end in itself, "good for good's sake," but is of value only as the one acceptable means of access to God, in communion with whom life is to culminate for the whole creation in "shalom," that rich Hebrew word inclusive of justice, peace, prosperity, and therefore joy. The historic American phrase "under God" implies all this straight out from the soul of the Bible and the soul of our nation's founders; and without this under-God-ness, such soul degenerates into moralism and legalism and chauvinism and materialism--in a word, "secularism" in the negative sense. Without life lived consciously and consistently "under God," we become languid and pessimistic in face of defeats and life's little and big untowardnesses--as in this limerick on degenerate Puritanism:

"God's plan made a hopeful beginning,

But man spoiled his chances by sinning.

We trust that the story
Will end in God's glory,

But at present the other side's winning."

I said, "degenerate Puritanism." The Puritanism in our nation's original soul was UNdegenerate, with original sin and all the grand biblical-Calvinist certainties. Let's have, now, a swift look at the pristine Puritan qualities as they controlled the Puritan revolution in England long before our American Revolution, which indeed may be fruitfully viewed as a continuation of the former revolution. This church in Chappaqua was founded as a "Congregational" church, an adjective of local defiance against "tyranny," meaning anything larger than local! Read the Mayflower Compact of 1620 in the same sitting as the Declaration of Independence, and you sense how early we as this particular denomination and nation got going our touchiness about tyranny! [Of course the arrogance of localism has little to commend it over the larger arrogancies--but that's a story for another time.]

I lift up now, what I consider the three central qualities in that original Puritan soul, in hope that it may help us as a pilgrim people in need now of a livelier sense of the originating and now ailing soul of our nation.

FIRST, *theocentric gratitude*, the steady life-tone of such thanksgiving to God as centers all of life in him [that's what that technical word, "theocentric," means]. We Americans, under the fervors and fevers of World War II, added the "under God" to our Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. No matter how embarrassing to pluralism, the addition signals the heart of Puritanism as the most influential strand in the original "American way of life." Said the founder of Pennsylvania, "Man will serve God or tyrants." The American ethos is secondarily demo-cratic [PEOPLE-ruling] but primarily theo-cratic [GOD-ruling], i.e. "under God," who is both sovereign (and

therefore occasions ultimate faith) and gracious (and therefore occasions intimate trust). What overwhelms us Puritans in our daily meditation is the mood of gratitude to the biblical God, in whom converge nature and grace, the ultimate and the intimate, the lordly and the lowly. [Over my desk at New York Theological Seminary is a huge rendition of Rouault's "The Robing of Christ" the servant-lord, a royal robe of power mockingly put on the shoulders of the Powerless One whose paradoxical power points more persuasively, for me, to the heart of reality and of the human condition than does any other power.] This note of grateful joy is, of course, not exclusively Puritan or even exclusively Christian. It permeates Jesus' favorite book, Second Isaiah, in which the complementary notes of immanence-servant-intimacy (chap.53) and transcendence-lord-ultimacy (chap.55) are kept in creative tension. But Puritanism is intensely biblical in feeling and living this paradoxical joy in grace, to which joy in nature is subserviently complementary. Joyful response to God's coming to us in and as Jesus, who is victorious over all the life-denying forces, frees us to live with confidence in "providence" and therefore to labor with hope as we daily attend to the Word converging "the internal testimony" of Spirit, our spirits, Scripture, history and the here-and-now action of God in heart and world. [NOTE: For Puritans, daily devotion, person and as family, is not optional but is normal behavior, on pain of soul degeneracy.]

SECOND, *integrity*. We Puritans see ourselves not "under the gods" but rather "under [the biblical] God" of truth and love, who says in both Testaments "Be holy, for I am holy." This vision and commitment rejects the individual/social split: my heart and home and society all stand under the same blazing judgment of divine truth, demanding the rejection of the self-serving lie, the false image, the pseudo-event--and insisting on reality against narcissistic fantasy, accuracy against duplicity, and independent judgment against conformism. The motive of zeal to glorify God is engined by the mood of gratitude to God for salvation in Jesus Christ, whom the lie killed, whose life and death and resurrection answer Pilate's question, "What is truth?" Here lies the root of English and Puritan criticism and radicalism, and the strongest encouragement given to the pursuit of knowledge both as experiment ["science"] and as education [the public-school movement, and America's great Puritan-inspired private universities (Harvard, Yale, Chicago)]. The so-called Founding Fathers should be scored for their spotty application of "freedom," but more remarkable is their personal adherence to the tough, costly values that cluster under the character designation, "integrity."

THIRD AND LAST, *responsibility*. We Puritans "under God" are responsible to God for the way we treat his creation, including ourselves. He won't finally tolerate a Faustian incurvature of desire or a Promethean arrogance of power corrupting vision and therefore self and society and nature. When this "fear of God" is weak, confidence becomes overconfidence: confidence of self-society in God degenerates into confidence in self/society [e.g., Laissez-fairism and Marxism]. God's grace includes his grace-gifts ["charisms"] as well as his nature-gifts ["talents"], and both are to be developed for his glory and the good of his creation: therefore, prayer, meditation, education, self-restraint, hard work ["the Puritan work-ethic"], and reliability. The judgment overarching and completing this discipline is "accountability": God gives us gifts that make us lords and obligations to use them that should make us servants who, within the sphere of the gift of freedom, accept the burden of choice and the consequences of our decisions, balancing introspection and action and condemning greed, puristic withdrawal [evading politics because of its inescapable and necessary compromises], scribism [evading worldly ambiguity by imposing holy-book constructs], moralism, legalism, neurotic guilt detached from biblical forgiveness, repressive id [versus deferred gratification], the authoritarian personality, and self-justification--all of which are temptations to Puritans, along with philistinism [esthetic insensitivity and censoriousness, with suspicion of beauty and of image (therefore, iconoclasm)], death-of-a-salesman successism, self-righteousness, left-brain dominance [intellectualism, rationalistic reductionism], mystery bad-

mouth, and macho toughness over tenderness. In other words, Puritanism holds up such high standards of private and public responsibility that its degenerate fragments tend to be precisely so many instances of irresponsible attitudes and behavior.

I close with a picture that gathers the central meaning of this sermon. On our door at home here in Chappaqua is a bronze eagle-knocker on which is my father's name, which is also my name. When my parents died several years ago, I removed it from the front door of the home in which they lived for more than a half century and installed it on our home to replace an electric bell that didn't work. [I'll resist the preacher-temptation to make something of that!] Now, is it an American eagle? That's what we call it, but its lineage goes way back to the Roman eagle, which was a symbol of the omniscience and omnipotence of the Roman imperium: the eagle sees everything and can attack anything. You will remember that Ben Franklin was afraid of that, and suggested instead the wild turkey as a native American bird. [I'll resist also, almost, any remarks about America having become a turkey, and tame.] Well, as the world looks on America at our Bicentennial today, what bird do you think others see? Sadly we must confess that many of the wretched of the earth see us as a Roman eagle, including our own native Americans, the reds--who were here long before we whites and blacks and yellows and browns. [When you turn up an arrowhead or stone tool in your Chappaqua garden, as I have on several occasions, can you not feel the moral complexity of "America," the provisionality of our tenure on the land that belongs only to God?] Now, those who were here before us also had the eagle as supreme totemic emblem. For all the Indian Americans, the eagle symbolizes the Great Spirit, who does indeed from on high see all things, but in the interest not of repression but of benediction and harmony. How sadly odd that that understanding is closer to the Puritan than is what America has come to! How much more do I want to think of the Amerind eagle than of the Roman eagle when I see our door knocker!...But one more eagle reference: the biblical eagle is God in his delivering [Ex.19:4] and teaching [Deut.32:11], and also those who center their lives in, seek the guidance of, "wait" for God: "They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" [Is.40:31]. How like our text! What the Lord requires of us--us biblical peoples, Jews and Christians, us Americans--is that in this Tricentennium we use our God-given powers and opportunities to do justice against age-long and nation-long wrongs, to love compassion and show it in the use of our private and public resources, and to walk in humble, eager openness with our God, "under God." We now, and throughout the rest of our brief lives, are making tomorrow's meaning of the American eagle.

NOTE TO READER: As preached, the sermon was, than this printed text, (1) slightly shorter and (2) somewhat less technical in wording....Copies may be obtained from the church, Chappaqua NY 10514.

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