

Founding Vision: Floundering

Independence Day Weekend

Text: Isaiah 58:12; Romans 12:2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Let me simply try to give a word that will wind together the various pieces of this morning as we've thought about our nation, about our present situation, the challenge before us. It seems to me that that song elicits from us that which is deepest in us. It is the poets that draw out that which is noble, and I really believe there is a great reservoir of good people and of good heart in the American people, frankly in the people of the world. And I believe that it is poetry in song that moves us in our depths and allows that which is best about us to come to expression. It is finally the vision that will beckon us to realize that high goal of the rule of God, moving toward the Shalom of which the prophets spoke.

Our world is in crisis, and our nation is in crisis. It is not an overstatement to speak in our day of culture wars. But it is good for us to know that that's really nothing new. There has always been in this land protest, taking to the streets, the political process, the lobbying for advantage, the clamor for rights and for human dignity. And in our particular situation today, maybe the nub of it in this nation, in a time of transition and a lot of social unrest and turmoil, centers around whether or not we can realize that founding vision which is floundering. Whether or not we can realize that grand dream of our founding documents and the passion that filled the lives of those who came to this land to create an experiment in freedom. The question of whether or not there is an American culture, an American dream that is rooted in reality, that is reflective of truth.

One of the great tension points in our society today can be understood under that catch word "multiculturalism." There are voices from the margins, the minorities, the outsiders who are saying, "Hey, you tell your history and you have an identity which is caught up in the myth of the melting pot. But some of us never got included. Some of us have been left out. You tell the American story, but it's not reflective of the part that we've played. And you tell the American story and you gloss over some of the dark shadows that lie across it." And so we have voices, and they clamor to be heard. And then some of us who have been so steeped in the tradition and so blessed by it grow defensive, and we grow hostile and, before

we know it, there is a great gulf separating us. The right and the left. Us and them. And the nation is torn with tension and strife.

But it seems to me that, on this anniversary of our nation's founding, it's important to us to hear that word from the Lord and to see whether or not that founding vision is not rooted deeply in the biblical tradition. I think it is. Giving all due to the claims of those who have been excluded and have been left out and have been hurt, nonetheless, there is a magnificent vision there, a vision of human dignity, of human freedom, in responsible community. I think that Jon is quite right - the government will not do it for us. And it is for the people of God to lead the way. There was that day when God's people said, "Look, we're doing all of our religious thing. We fast and you don't hear." And then the word of the Lord came saying, "Take care of the poor. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take the homeless into your homes. Then you'll call and I will hear. Then you will seek me and I will be found by you. Then the dawn will break upon you. Then you will raise again the foundations of the generations. Then, then there will be streets in which you can dwell in safety."

It's almost as though the prophet could have written yesterday rather than way back in ancient Judah. But the point of the vision was that God is known and experienced in the doing of justice and in the loving of mercy. And in that founding vision, although it was not broad enough, although it was not inclusive enough, it was nonetheless rooted in that prophetic vision that comes to us as a gift from Israel's faith, that understanding of God as the Creator. Our founding documents root human dignity and human freedom in the Creator God, and we cannot in 1995 be Americans first any more than we can be Christians only. Our world is the size of a grapefruit. We live in a global community with intimate connection with a multiple diversity of this globe. It is time for the bells to sound, the bells to sound that celebrate the diversity of life, that can still find its unity and its coherence in its grounding in the Creator god who calls us to justice laced with compassion.

When I think of the task I read in the vision, something within me melts. I know it's true. And I observe the world and I could weep. Ready to throw up my hands and say, "Why preach? Why strive? Why continue to care? It goes against the grain of human nature. It's so contrary to every other aspect of our lives. Why continue to raise one's voice and hold up the vision and call people to dream the dream?" But then I remember that human transformation is possible. This is what Paul was writing about. "Be not conformed to this world." Do not give in to its aggressiveness and to its consumerism, to its competitiveness and to its destructiveness. Do not give in to its rugged individualism and its selfishness. Do not give in. Continue to dream. Continue to have rumors of Shalom floating across the atmosphere through the transformation of your mind.

That's what it really takes, folks. It really takes a transformation; it takes an altered consciousness. It calls us to a whole new way of being. Be not conformed

to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind to find the will of God, what is good and is true and acceptable. And down deep there's something in me that so yearns for that. And I believe it does for you, as well. If we could just turn the decibels down, that shouting across the great divide. If the Church, if the people of God could be at the forefront of reconciliation rather than the catalyst for division, if we could just listen to our hearts, if we could just follow the song, if we could just make real the songs we love to sing. Of America the Beautiful, thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears. Dear God, is it not worth a commitment of life anew on this Independence Day Weekend? God grant it.