

Sunday, November 2, 2008

Thoughts to ponder at the beginning

For wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill,
the eies of all people are uppon us...
- from John Winthrop's City on the Hill speech, 1630

One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun. –Reinhold Niebuhr

Saving the Soul of Our Nation: An Election Day Sermon © Sylvia Stocker

This past week, Ann Spencer brought me an article about the death of Scarlett the Cat. In case the only news you are following is election coverage (or what passes for it this year), let me bring you up to date. In 1996, a homeless feline in Brooklyn, NY, captured the hearts of the world by rescuing her five kittens from a burning abandoned building. Despite heat and flames, the little calico returned again and again to the burning building. By the time she pulled the last kitten from the blaze, her eyes were blistered shut, her coat singed, and her paws, face, and ears burned. Outside the building, no longer able to see, she touched each baby with her nose to make sure they were all there. She then lost consciousness.

Someone was watching her: David Gianelli, a 17-year veteran fire fighter. He brought the little family to an animal shelter where they were treated and put up for adoption. Thousands of people applied to adopt these cats. After her hellacious encounter with the inferno, Scarlett went to a family that pampered her for 12 years. And now, she has finally died.

I believe America today is on fire. Some among us, maybe even all of us, feel burned to some extent. Even so, saving the soul of our country will require trips into the fire to rescue the values we hold most dear, lest those values disintegrate in the flames.

The world is watching us, though I suspect there are few sympathetic witnesses ready to help us rescue America at this point. We suffer from disasters largely of our own making, disasters that have brought the rest of the world to its knees along with us.

And on Tuesday we hold our national elections.

Today, two days before one of the most important national elections we will ever vote in, I return to a tradition of yore, the Election Day sermon. Election Day sermons were popular in New England in the 18th and 19th centuries. To set the scene, I turn to my

colleague Forest Church, who has written about Election Day sermons. According to Church:

Often the brimstone was so hot that an Election Day sermon was the one sermon a minister might be remembered by. There was a reason for that. No words were minced. He entered the pulpit and for the next two hours...proclaimed a jeremiad. As in Jeremiah, the great Hebrew prophet.

Here's how it went. The world has gone, or is about to go to Hell. The reason is simple. God is punishing you for your sins. Whatever is wrong in this world is wrong because you are wrong-headed, wrong-hearted, inattentive to God's commandments, and God is watching and God is angry, and if you keep on messing up you will burn forever.

At least they burned for two long hours. Nonetheless, by the end of the pastor's jeremiad, almost everyone who listened did in fact feel at least partially responsible for everything that was going wrong in the world. No more "throw the bums out"; the bums were us.¹

If you haven't been keeping up with reading your Bible, and I know some of you haven't, let me tell you that the prophet Jeremiah was more pessimistic about the world than it is actually possible to be. He was gloomy. And fiery. Insofar as it is possible to be gloomy and fiery at the same time, that was Jeremiah.

Today I will not tell you how to vote. I do not want to risk our church losing its tax-exempt status. And I will not engage deep political analysis. You are intelligent people who can follow developments on your own. Just like me, you can locate the pundits in your newspapers and on your radios and television sets.

Instead, like the olden-day ministers, I will lift up what I see as the spiritual issues affecting our nation. *Unlike* my predecessors, I won't claim our woes result from divine retribution for our sins. (And I won't speak for two hours!) America is experiencing a hell of her own making; God has nothing to do with it. There's nobody but us to rescue the soul of our nation. In a democracy, the people have freedom to speak their views and choose their leaders. With that freedom comes responsibility for the outcome.

I believe America is suffering a spiritual crisis. Probably like you, I have my own list of concerns: the economy, the wars, health insurance, education, the erosion of civil liberties, and so on. But to my mind, those issues are not the *cause* of our spiritual malaise; rather they arise from it. The soul of our nation needs healing.

As I see it, the first strand of America's spiritual malaise is Greed. In his book *The Limits of Power*, Andrew Bacevich identifies some key crises at root in America's problems today. One of these is the crisis of profligacy. Bacevich writes:

“For the majority of contemporary Americans, the essence of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness centers on the relentless personal quest to acquire, to consume, to indulge, and to shed whatever constraints might interfere with those endeavors.”

He notes the popular American bumper stickers: “Shop until you drop,” and “Whoever dies with the most toys wins,” and “If it feels good, do it.”ⁱⁱ

How long has it been since we have known the shameful statistics identifying America as the world’s greatest consumer of natural resources, despite our relatively small proportion of the human population on this planet? I feel as though I’ve been aware of this for my entire adult life. Perhaps longer. But have we changed our ways?

Bacevich claims America’s insatiable appetites have now led us into expansionist conflicts around the world, most notably in the Middle East. We say we fight for freedom, but we actually fight to control the resources that feed our addictions. We send our children into conflict in the Middle East so that we can drive Hummers at home.

By adopting a policy of expansionism to feed our addictions, we have created the largest national deficit in history. Bacevich, whose book was published a few months ago, writes, presciently, about nervousness concerning, “a coming economic collapse comparable in magnitude to the Great Depression.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The key to altering America’s trajectory is to change habits, to tamp down on acquisitiveness and greed, to learn to live modestly. In recent years, this church has had great success with exploring and adopting Simple Living groups. Perhaps it is time to bring those groups front and center again, to invite new people to take part in them, and to spread their gospel to the wider community as well.

Saving the soul of our nation depends on learning a new way to be in the world; it depends on accepting our proper place among all peoples; it depends on living humbly and growing generous hearts.

America can do this.

We can do this.

Today I ask our new President, whoever he is, to inspire us to curb our appetites so that we can become honorable world citizens. It is time to sacrifice acquisitiveness and greed at the altar of reality and world community.

The second strand of our nation’s spiritual malaise is arrogance.

In his book, Bacevich traces American arrogance back to the founding of our nation, to 17th century rhetoric that held America up as God’s instrument to save the world. He cites

John Winthrop's vision of America as the "City on the Hill," language taken up more recently by Ronald Reagan. He recounts Thomas Paine's belief that Americans had the power to "begin the world over again." He lifts up FDR's demand that Americans keep their "rendezvous with destiny."^{iv}

When you have God on your side, it's pretty hard to fail, isn't it?

Perhaps more to the point, when you *believe* you have God on your side, it's pretty hard to discern your failings.

America at her best is a wonderful nation. She has brought more diverse people and cultures together under one mantle than any other nation on earth. Historically, she opened the door to freedom in ways humankind had never imagined. She has been generous and protective of her friends and neighbors in times of trial.

But America is not now, nor will she ever be, a perfect nation. Our country is large and rich and powerful. That size and wealth and power can be soul-crushing if we regard it as evidence that God has chosen us first among nations. To save the soul of our nation, I believe we need a new vision as a nation among all nations, a world citizen among all others. Not above, but among. Not controlling others, but in relationship with them. Not the select instrument of God, but a humble people moving forward with all other people, learning from the successes and failures that are the common lot of all humanity.

America can do this.

We can do this.

Today I ask our new President, whoever he is, to come to the table with other nations as an equal, to forego the arrogant image of America as God's chosen country, and to inspire a new vision for the American people – a vision of collaboration and world citizenship.

The third strand of America's spiritual malaise is divisiveness. Polarization.

Come Wednesday, our President-elect will face the tough challenge of reuniting America after we have been rent asunder by a brutal election season. Come Wednesday, I hope we can begin to relearn to be one America, *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one.

But it won't be easy. This year's campaign has fanned the flames of discord. We hear of "real Americans" and "real America." Even a particular brand of humor cuts us apart from each other. Consider this email circulating again now, as it did four years ago after the last presidential election:

Dear Red States:

We've decided we're leaving. We intend to form our own country, and we're taking the other Blue States with us. That includes California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois and all the Northeast. We believe this split will be beneficial to the nation, and especially to the people of the new country of New California.

You get Texas, Oklahoma and all the slave states. We get stem cell research and the best beaches. We get the Statue of Liberty. You get Dollywood. We get 85 percent of America's venture capital and entrepreneurs. You get Alabama. We get two-thirds of the tax revenue, you get to make the red states pay their fair share.

Since our aggregate divorce rate is 22 percent lower than the Christian Coalition's, we get a bunch of happy families. You get a bunch of single moms. Please be aware that Nuevo California will be pro-choice and anti-war, and we're going to want all our citizens back from Iraq at once. If you need people to fight, ask your evangelicals. They have kids they're apparently willing to send to their deaths for no purpose.

We will have firm control of 80 percent of the country's fresh water, more than 90 percent of the pineapple and lettuce, 92 percent of the nation's fresh fruit, 95 percent of America's quality wines, 90 percent of all cheese, 90 percent of the high tech industry, most of the U.S. low-sulfur coal, all living redwoods, sequoias and condors, all the Ivy and Seven Sister schools plus Stanford, Cal Tech and MIT.

With the Red States, you will have to cope with 88 percent of all obese Americans (and their projected health care costs), 92 percent of all U.S. mosquitoes, nearly 100 percent of the tornadoes, 90 percent of the hurricanes, 99 percent of all Southern Baptists, virtually 100 percent of all televangelists, Rush Limbaugh, Bob Jones University and the University of Georgia.

We get Hollywood and Yosemite, thank you. (and so on...)

Differences among Americans are real and passionately felt. But separating ourselves into Us and Them is harmful.

Recent population studies show that since the 1976 presidential election, the American population has shifted itself into enclaves of political preference. Bill Bishop, author of *The Big Sort*, says it this way:

“... ways of life now have a distinct politics and a distinct geography. Feminist synchronized swimmers belong to one political party and live over here, and calf ropers

belong to another party and live over there. As people seek out the social settings they prefer – as they choose the group that makes them feel the most comfortable – the nation grows more politically segregated – and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogenous groups.”^v

“The big sort,” as Bishop calls this phenomenon, is worthy of its own sermon, and I have it in mind for sometime in the future. For now, suffice it to say we ignore our current habits of self-selecting homogenous groupings at our peril. Homogeneity generates the seeds of intolerance and bigotry. I urge all of us to renew our efforts to welcome those who seem different from us, to foster improved communication and listening. We may well discover that the things that unite us, *e pluribus unum*, outnumber the things that seem to divide us.

America can do this.

We can do this.

I ask our new President to lead the way by refusing to surround himself with yes-men and yes-women but to set an example of inclusiveness, discovery, and deep listening for all of us to follow.

With Tuesday’s election comes change. We cannot predict the outcome – not of the election, nor of the ways our new leader will guide our nation. A difficult road lies ahead of us. It wasn’t easy for Scarlett the cat to return repeatedly to a burning building. But what choice did she have? It won’t be easy for us to set our country right again – to save the soul of our nation. But what choice do we have?

We can commit to doing our part, to create the kind of change that will heal our nation. We can commit to turning away from greed, arrogance, and polarization and turning toward a new vision of an America occupied by people who vow to share this beautiful planet, to live together as equals, and to learn from one another.

We can ask this of our new President. And we can ask it of ourselves. So may it be.

ⁱ “Religion and the Body Politic,” Forest Church. <http://uua.org/news/newssubmissions/121441.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Andrew J. Bacevich, 2008. *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. (New York: Metropolitan Books.) 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bacevich, 65.

^{iv} Bacevich, 38.

^v Bill Bishop, 2008, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.) 14.