

“God Bless America”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
July 5, 2009 - the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
and Based on Mark 6:1-13, Psalm 48, and Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America”
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

Today’s gospel lesson has always sat awkwardly with me. It seems to uphold the ideal of the itinerant preacher. Itinerant preachers, the original ones, at any rate, were those apostles Jesus sent out two by two with “no bread, no bag, [and] no money in their belts.” They were told to go wherever they were welcome, and to stay and preach the gospel and work miracles in Jesus’ name. It’s a tough act to follow, let me tell you—I mean, the going out with nothing and yet you’re expected to accomplish great and even miraculous things. But that’s not the part that sits awkwardly with me. The awkward part is the presumed criticism against the ‘settled’ clergy. The ‘settled’ clergy are those who do not travel about, those who are tied to a particular place. They, we have to presume, took offense at Jesus when he came home and taught in their synagogue. That’s the part that stings. Is it not possible to be settled and a preacher of the gospel?

Strictly speaking, of course, I am not a settled preacher, for I, too, must travel about in search of households that will welcome my preaching and what miracles I can muster in Jesus’ name. It’s in the nature of my work, although not too long ago settled clergy were the norm and itinerant preachers were the exception. Still, if the truth be told, I would like to be settled. I would like to stay in one place for a long time so that I could enjoy what many if not most of you already enjoy, namely, a piece of property I could call home. Elaine and I talk about this from time to time. Where to plant our tomatoes? Where to raise her sheep? Is Minnesota our home? Was Illinois?

I would like to be settled and yet I cannot. The nature of my work prevents it.

Worse, Scripture itself seems to argue against it. “Seems,” I say, because I have since found scholarship that says, Look, somebody’s got to be home to receive the itinerants, yes? You can’t expect anyone to wander about if no one’s going to be home to receive them. And if such sympathetic homeowners are required, then they should have an on-site community of faith of their own, yes? They shouldn’t have to wait until the next boat load of preachers arrives, and their spiritual and/or miraculous needs can be met. That wouldn’t make any sense!

Oh, thank you! I said when I discovered this common sense. I didn’t have to apologize for wanting a home, even if acquiring one was impossible right now. Just the idea of it was enough.

But the gospel criticism did not go away. The temptation to regard this land as the best of all possible worlds, regardless of what Jesus or any disciples of his might say, is very, very great. It almost seems inevitable that the more firmly connected you are to one place, the more likely you are to defend it, to resist all critiques of it, to even resent those outsiders who come to your neighborhood in order to tell you how things should be. It’s

an inevitable, perfect set-up for taking offense at the gospel.

And yet, The Land. Our homeland. How can this not be a great and good thing? Who does not warm to the sight of a Minnesota lake? Or shore line? Or skyline? I go away for a while, and then come back and reach the I-35 ridge at Burnsville with its magnificent first glimpse of downtown Minneapolis, and I think, Oh, it's good to be home!

And here's another thing: this celebration of a particular place near and dear to us, it's in the Bible, too. Our psalm for today, Psalm 48, says "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised *in the city of our God.*" That city is not in heaven; it's right here on earth. It is Mount Zion, which is the biblical name for Jerusalem. Jerusalem cannot be viewed from the I-35 ridge at Burnsville. It must be viewed in Israel, and preferably on Israeli side of the wall. On the other side, you're likely to get into trouble, if only because the Israeli police will be suspicious of why you're there and not on their side. But it's *that* Jerusalem that Psalm 48 is talking about, or at least the one found in the time of King David when neighboring kings assembled—I am now quoting from the psalm itself—when neighboring "kings assembled, / they came on together / [and] as soon as they saw it, they were astounded; / they were in a panic, they took to flight." *That* Jerusalem.

Did little old Jerusalem ever cause its neighbors to panic? Perhaps it did when David was in charge, but for the greater part of its history, it's inhabitants have been the ones who have had to do the panicking. Jerusalem is nothing if not a city besieged. That's even the title of a book I have on the subject: *Jerusalem Besieged: From Ancient Canaan to Modern Israel*, University of Michigan Press, 2004, and written by Eric H. Cline, Associate Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. "A lonely ship on a hostile sea" he calls it. "There have been at least 118 separate conflicts," he writes, "in and for Jerusalem during the past four millennia.... Jerusalem has been destroyed completely at least twice, besieged twenty-three times, attacked an additional fifty-two times, and captured and recaptured forty-four times. It has been the scene of twenty revolts and innumerable riots, has had at least five separate periods of violent terrorist attacks during the past century, and has only changed hands completely peacefully twice in the past four thousand years" (p. 2). If that is home, then please, accept my transfer, now!

Even so, Jerusalem is still Mount Zion. It is still the city of our God, it is still the place we long for when we think of the place where God chooses his name to dwell.

Did Jesus do away with all that, replacing a settled community with a permanently unsettled one?

I don't think so. As common sense told me once before, so I repeat those words now: there cannot be a home in which itinerant preachers may refresh themselves if home owners must be permanently unsettled. Cultivating the land, caring for it, nurturing it is the very first commandment given to humankind: "Be fruitful and multiply," God said, "and fill the earth and subdue it," Genesis 1:28. I know those two emphases—filling the earth and subduing it—give many pause (aren't they the reason our environment is in the mess it's in?), I assure you now they are our salvation. For lack of time I cannot develop this now, but I would assert that fruitfulness and subjugation are necessary to each other's survival—to our survival. We cannot survive if we are not fruitful, and we cannot sur-

vive if we do not curb the inherent tendency to proliferate irresponsibly that fruitfulness alone inspires. Unchecked fruitfulness, I do believe, is another name for cancer.

So, where are we? We've got settled communities on the one hand, and they're necessary and even much to be desired, and we've got a constantly moving about gospel whose job it is to preach to those communities, and sometimes to tell them they need to get their act together, and always to work miracles in them—at least in the households that will receive them. The two of necessity live in tension with each other. The homeowners are nervous about how they will fare at the hands of their guests, and the guests are nervous about how they will fare at the hands of their hosts. It was always so, and it always will be. Amen for generations to come.

I'm going to close with a slightly different take on this relationship. Michael's going to sing Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," and I am glad he is. It's a song that perfectly illustrates the relationship between settled and unsettled communities I've been talking about. "God Bless America" is regarded as one of the great rallying cry songs of our times. It was sung fervently after the attacks of 9/11. It was also sung fervently on May 19, 1974, when the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team opened their Stanley Cup playoffs. The Flyers had adopted the song prior to that championship. They won. "God Bless America" is thus a talisman of sorts used to ward off all intruders, whether benign or not.

But that's not why Irving Berlin wrote the song. He wrote it as an immigrant grateful to arrive on our hospitable shores. In his native Russia, his family was persecuted. But not here. And when he saw another persecution on the horizon—the rise of Nazi Germany in 1938—he pulled out the song he had composed twenty years before, dusted it off, and gave it to Kate Smith to sing on Armistice Day, 1938, as a prayer for peace to our God:

While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,
Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.
God Bless America,
Land that I love.
Stand beside her, and guide her
Thru the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies,
To the oceans, white with foam
God bless America, my home sweet home.

In that context, the song is a perfect celebration of a land perennially tempted to boast in its blessings, and yet, when under attack, it rallies to its first love, God—or so Irving Berlin understood. But he was right to proclaim this ideal, I would say, even if we might be skeptical it's being realized. I respond our skepticism is akin to the lack of faith Jesus' neighbors expressed in his home town. It's akin to the incredulosity we may feel when told Jerusalem is a city that causes its neighbors to quake. It's akin to the

cynicism of those who believe the only good Christian is one who is not at home, who does not love his native land, who despises this particular plot of created earth. God called it good; we should do no less.

Sing away, Michael! And on this 4th of July weekend, let us give thanks for our native land even as we nervously tolerate the preachers in her midst. It's the way it's supposed to be.

Amen.