

Finding God in the Declaration of Independence

It says in your bulletins and the Prayer Book this morning that we are to have a sermon at this point in the service. I looked up definitions for sermons on the internet I found that a sermon is defined as: "*A talk on a religious or moral subject, usually based on a passage from the Bible.*" And it went on to say: "...a long or tedious admonition or reproof." I didn't like the sound of that much, so I said to myself, "Well, I just give a homily instead of a sermon."

But then I looked up homily and didn't like that definition much better: "*A religious discourse intended for spiritual edification...a tedious, moralizing discourse.*" There's that word again, "tedious" again. And I don't feel particularly qualified or inclined toward taking part in either one of those sorts of speeches. So I thought maybe we might, in this 4th of July season when thoughts of our country and our country's history are particularly on our minds, that we might just take the time to make a few observations regarding our nation's spiritual background and ponder what it might imply to us today.

Living in a time when issues of war, religious politics, and a whole host of other moral opinions divide the United States, talking about patriotism, love of country and the like while implying a relationship with God seems like maybe an imprudent thing to undertake. To many in America today, just speaking the name of our nation and the name of God in the same sentence is offensive. This seems to be especially true of that little phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance, "...one nation, under God...". Or when we look at the motto inscribed on our money and see "In God we Trust".

So as we look to the impending July 4th celebration this week marking the 236th year of our independence as a nation, I wonder, can we really be patriotic and profess christianity at the same time? Can God and tenants of christian living really be a part of the fabric of our day to day governance and political life?

Well, one of the axioms you often hear sports coaches and sportscasters bandy about is "*When things aren't real clear about the direction of your athletic program, always go back to the basics.*" So maybe we could take a page from that play book and take a look at the basic foundation of our national experience to gain a little insight. Let's you and I go back to the basics.

With that idea in mind, I thought it might be interesting as we approach this presumably secular holiday of Independence Day 2012 to see what we could do about finding God in the Declaration of Independence of 1776 by reading some of it and thinking about its message.

One writer I found when exploring that subject in preparation for this morning claims that 52 of the 55 signers of the Declaration of Independence were orthodox, practicing Christians. The other three were deists, who looked to the Bible for truth and knowledge about a divine creator whom they felt influenced America's destiny.

And backing that statistic up, there's the testimony of Patrick Henry. He spoke his famous "Give me Liberty or give me death" speech in 1775, but in 1776 he wrote: *"It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great Nation was founded not be religionists, but by Christians..."* That is, we were founded not by people who just go around professing their religious zeal with excessive enthusiasm, but by men who acknowledged and practiced their faith.

And just as an aside, and perhaps to provide a little context, I'll bet you didn't know that it was Congress itself that formed the American Bible Society and that one of the first acts of the first Congress was to purchase 20,000 copies of the Bible for the citizens of this new nation.

On the other hand, some, or at least one, of our leading citizens have recently publicly declared that, "America is not a Christian nation." And while that may be offensive to many of us, it is probably closer to being true today than it was in 1776 when our Declaration of Independence was first written and when most of our nation's founders expressed their Christian faith without hesitation...in their writings and their everyday life.

Its a beautiful document, that Declaration of Independence. Its splendor is shrouded at first reading in its simplicity, its sobriety and its straightforward approach to its theme. Nothing extraneous. No stirring rhetoric and, most notably, it's ideology free. Yet it still shines today as a model of political theory.

A ringing treatise against tyranny, it is also a call for moderation to those who argue that the name of God should be deleted from every public square or school in the US of A and, most importantly, banned from the halls of government.

It starts: *"When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."*

Notice the thinking here. The action the Americans are taking is morally justified.

The case for independence is not based on military calculations as to the probability of success on the battlefield, nor upon economic considerations or personal preferences. It's based on self-evident truths concerning the nature and rights of man as given to him by his Creator. Sorry to all you secularists, were talking about God here...the God who determined that there are certain natural rights that have been given to each and every human being. And it is those rights we were seeking to have restored to us after they had been denied by some earthly monarch.

Having set forth in plain terms the principles of proper governance, the founding fathers then went on to lay out 27 succinct grievances as proof of English tyranny. "To prove this," they say, "let facts be submitted to a candid world."

"Facts submitted to a candid world"...doesn't that sound refreshing? The Declaration's signers see a world where every citizen can line up the fundamental principles that determine good and evil in this world (as defined by God) against facts set forth in a document like this and then make a moral judgement. Tyranny, for example, is wrong not because the majority of people consider it to be evil, but because self-determination and representation are natural rights of every political community and those rights are self evident. They are based on the natural rights that our Creator gave us and are applied by using the gift of human reason that He also supplied to us.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence make their points with both logic and elegance. They want the world to know that their decision to break from England is a final recourse after a long history of failed attempts at reconciliation. They stress that they have humbly and repeatedly petitioned for redress and suffered only repeated injury in response. Why such an obsession with laying out their motives for separation? Who were they trying to convince? Why such concern about ethical principles?

The signers of the Declaration of Independence are, once again, looking to God, whom they refer to as "the Supreme Judge of the world" for a moral stamp of approval.

Listen to their words: *"We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled, and appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do solemnly publish and declare that these United Colonies are, and by right ought to be Free and Independent States..."*

Such simplicity, sobriety and succinctness in a political document is only possible when a nation's fundamental principles are unyielding, firmly and universally understood, and can be simply stated as established by God. Today our mutual understanding of those principles seems to be shifting underneath us, both at home and on the global level. The thousand page documents that have recently been enacted in the US and abroad are of necessity so complex because we find ourselves unable to agree to a definition of the terms of moral justification upon which those acts

and treaties are to be based. The commonplace gridlock at the United Nations and in our own legislative bodies abundantly demonstrate the consequences of a moral vacuum. The members find it impossible to agree upon, and demand respect for, some set of basic human rights and responsibilities because they have stripped their political language of all relation to God and Natural Law. They therefore have no universal reference point for right and wrong.

How can anyone question that the U. S. was founded on Christian principles by men for whom their religious convictions were an inherent part of their daily thinking and living. Whether it remains so today or even should remain so is another question entirely that I leave for your own consideration. But let us all be very clear about how the people of this nation saw themselves and the world in 1776. God and Christian principles are the vital and integral framework around which the document that started it all and justified this nation's existence is constructed...the one we call our Declaration of Independence.

This 4th of July week we have many things to be grateful for--and not the least of these is the wisdom and courage of our founding fathers to look beyond themselves and their differences (religious and otherwise) and up to God for the truth about man and the just organization of human affairs. Their closing paragraph is definitive:

"And for the support of this Declaration with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

Amen.