

“The Two Americas”

A Sermon on the Sunday closest to Independence Day

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Matthew 22:21 — “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Every year around this time, I have to remind myself that, of the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower*, only 37 came to America seeking religious freedom; the other 65 were merchants, craftspeople, servants, or outlaws fleeing the authorities for one reason or another. Indeed, the Pilgrims themselves were outlaws, having fled first to the Netherlands before setting out for the New World. The entire *Mayflower* operation, in fact, was funded by a syndicate of 70 venture capitalists in London hoping to make a fortune in fur and fishing.

That’s our DNA. There have always been two Americas: the America of ideals and idealists, and the America of materialistic opportunism. Both built this country, stamped it with their values, and we are their physical and spiritual heirs, for better and for worse.

And so I’ve always felt it incumbent upon me as a Christian preacher to take as my text on the Sunday closest to Independence Day Jesus’ words, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

These words have been quoted for generations, often as though they were a simple directive to keep religion and government separate.

But Jesus was doing something much more profound than simply telling his followers which lane to drive in.

He was speaking out of a national struggle over power, identity, and belonging.

Jesus’ religious opponents had come to him with a question that was meant to trap him: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

They were asking, in effect: Whose side are you on? Are you a collaborator with Rome or are you a resister with us?

But Jesus refused the categories they offered.

He asked for a coin.

“Whose image is on it?”

“The emperor’s.”

Then Jesus said: “So give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The coin bears the image of Caesar and so belongs to Caesar.

But every human being bears the image of God and so belongs to God.

The image stamped on the money may be Caesar’s, it may be George Washington’s or it may be the King of England’s.

But regardless of whose image and likeness it is, Jesus’ words remind us that no empire, no government, no nation, no earthly power gets the final word about who we are and whose we are.

Those images matter, of course, as Jesus knew, for two reasons.

The first is that entrepreneurs like those who came over on the *Mayflower* do the necessary work to allow people to be fed, housed, and clothed, and to raise families, enjoy neighbors, and contribute to their communities.

While it is true, as Jesus said, that we do not live by bread alone, it is equally true that none of us can live without it. Abraham and Sarah were not called to be a blessing to a shivering, starving world. They were called, rather, to order a new way of being materially in the world so that no one would shiver or starve—a way of ordering that we call social justice.

The second reason those images of material power matter is because behind those images are narratives of salvation.

These are the people, those images say, who save all of you who transact your lives with the coinage of this realm. They are your benefactors. They deliver you from poverty. They deliver you from your enemies. They show you the way to peace and prosperity. Trust us, those images say. Or as we say today, trust us like it says on the money.

Those visible images, stamped on the money, all come with salvation narratives for those for whom salvation consists of nothing more than a warm fireside, a dry bed, and a full belly.

And while those whose images are before us on the money may be able to deliver us from want and enemies, what they cannot deliver us from is evil. For that, we pray to another whose invisible image is stamped on us, and that image, too, claims to be salvific.

It's God's image. It is the image that tells another, different narrative of salvation. And that narrative competes with Caesar's narrative for our allegiance. It competes with the image that says that material wellbeing for us and ours is the only wellbeing that matters.

The divine image, on the other hand, says that we live, as Genesis puts it, to serve and preserve God's creation. The narrative of which the divine is the center begins with providing for others: God created the heavens and the earth and God planted a garden in Eden and said to the earthlings, "You may help yourselves to everything edible here except one thing."

All of that abundance, all of that nourishment, everything we needed and wanted – it was given by God, the original One for Others.

And then the One for Others said to Abraham and Sarah, "Leave everything that matters to you and go to a place where you can live for others – I will bless you there and make you a blessing for the entire world so that the world can, from your example, order itself in such a way as to be a blessing to itself."

That narrative says that we get to live for ourselves only when everyone – God's entire creation – is included in the "we."

That's the narrative stamped with the divine image, and that narrative conflicts with the narrative stamped with Caesar's image – and the images of the funders of the *Mayflower* and King Saul's image as our first lesson teaches us.

The story of Israel's demand for a king tells us that even the people stamped with God's image who claimed that image for themselves couldn't resist the temptation to stamp themselves with an earthly ruler's image as well. Living as God's people wasn't sufficient: too many battles were being lost, too much territory was beyond their grasp, too many leaders were creating chaos and confusion.

So give us a king, the people's representatives demanded of God's representative. Give us a king like the other nations so that we can BE like the other nations – and fight our own fights and win our own battles and claim our own territory. And be our own people.

But they weren't their own people. They were God's people and they were surrendering that identity in favor of another.

And Samuel warned the people that the consequences would be dire, but the people insisted. And because God is love and love does not coerce, God allowed the people to choose dire consequences for themselves: "Give them a king."

As we are celebrating 250 years of the experiment that is called America, we have reminded ourselves, among other things, of our rejection of kingship. In a nation that still overwhelmingly claims to be religious, most of us still claim in word if not necessarily in deed that the image stamped on us by the divine matters most, and our allegiance lies there, and not with any earthly power.

And that stubborn insistence that God's image comes first, God's image comes last, and God's image comes always for every single person – that unyielding insistence on the presence of the divine in our daily lives makes us as American as anyone who has arrived on these shores or anyone who was here when they did.

And that is a reason to celebrate. That insistence that God is still speaking to us as believers and as citizens, telling us that God is not finished with us yet as individuals or as a nation – that is a call from the future and it is a message of hope. It is the call that creates that other America – aspirational America.

What is true for each of us is equally true of our country: we do not have to be who we are; we can be who we aspire to be. There is more to us – much more – than the self that meets the world in the daily grind. Each of us carries within us a divine image that is a collection of ideals, hopes, and aspirations, all of which can be realized in varying degrees.

And there is more to America than our history, checkered that it is. There is more to America than our problems, intractable though they seem. There is more to America than our politics, fractured though they are. There is more to America than the gross materialism and destructive consumerism that have wreaked such havoc on God's creation. There is more to America than the pious hypocrisies that acknowledge land belonging to others while doing nothing to right the massive wrong of genocide.

Those deplorable realities are part of our identity, to be sure, but America is also more than those.

There is another America, and that is the America celebrated in its ideals, ideals that have been written about, spoken about, hotly debated, and continually defined and refined.

Those are the ideals that have shaped this nation – imperfectly, to be sure, but unflinchingly: liberty, equality, democracy, the rule of law, the necessity of education, and

the hope that people can live together in communities of practice where every person has dignity and worth.

We have not lived up to those ideals – not a single one of them truly, purely, or consistently – but some of us refuse to abandon them. And that refusal to give up on our ideals is the powerful resistance most needed at this moment of rampant nativist populism among the people, the obscene concentration of wealth by a ruling oligarchy, and growing authoritarianism in government – a government for which we voted.

The buying and the selling, the extractive mindset, and the insane belief that the earth belongs to the entitled few rather than to God notwithstanding, America remains, as Alexis de Tocqueville recognized in the 18th century, a country of ideals and idealists – a country of aspirations, in other words. That America, aspirational America, the invisible America, is a people stamped by the divine and nurtured by a broad and embracing faith.

I want to head toward closing by holding up just one example of that broad and embracing faith. It's found on a card I received a few days ago from Ellie and Carlton Stock, wishing me a happy Interdependence Day. The card contains excerpts from an essay by Baratunde Thurston, whose name some of you may recognize from his PBS series, "America Outdoors."

Having adopted a Declaration of Independence 250 years ago, the card says, we now need to adopt a Declaration of Interdependence.

"In this age of cascading crises," Baratunde writes, "as we revisit the more complete founding narrative of our nation, living in the truth of our interdependence may be the most important choice we can make."

Baratunde's PBS program sprang from a desire to make this country's natural spaces feel more welcoming to Black Americans. That desire, to expand the circle of safety and belonging, was stamped on Baratunde at an early age, first in his parochial Catholic school and later at the prestigious Sidwell Friends School, whose mission statement explicitly notes as its guiding philosophy the Quaker belief in "that of God in everyone."

"That of God in everyone" is the divine image stamped on all of us, the image that came from God and belongs to God. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all bear that image and, at our best, we recognize that image in everyone and bring that image to all our dealings not only with other human beings, but with all of God's creation.

"It is hard," Baratunde goes on, "to let go of the myth of separation, domination, and individualistic independence, given the culture in which most of us have been raised. It's time to recognize that democracy in its highest form was not imported from Europe—it was

native to this land [in its indigenous peoples], rooted in peace, equality, ecological stewardship, and balance, and it was willingly shared. This is not a call to replace the founding story. It is a call to expand it—a unifying vision that makes room for all the excluded to belong to the authentic story of this nation and to the story of life. And this time around, we can grow from “We the People,” to “We the Living.”

That voice, from a young Black man I've known since he was an undergraduate, gives me hope. That is the voice of aspirational America and, with God's help, that voice and others like it will prevail.

As we celebrate our 250th year of experimenting with democracy in this place, let us celebrate not only historical America but also aspirational America, as well. Let us celebrate the two Americas.

We close our service by singing together hymn number 340, "This Is My Song."