

SERVANTHOOD AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

A Sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
Stanford Memorial Church, University Public Worship
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Last Tuesday we had a memorial service here for John Gardner -- renowned social activist, founder of Common Cause, adviser to many U.S. Presidents, Stanford graduate and longtime trustee of this university. Just before the end of the service, the congregation sang four verses of "America the Beautiful," written by Katherine Lee Bates at the end of the nineteenth century. A number of tearful people remarked afterwards that this patriotic song came alive for them at that moment in a way it hasn't literally for decades. That's because many of those attendees, like myself, have had to fight cynicism about this nation and its leadership that's continued to grow through the years of the Vietnam War, Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Monica Lewinsky affair, and so much else. John Gardner, however, was not only an effective critic and a reformer, he was also a visionary optimist who believed deeply in the American Dream. When he was named Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare by President Johnson in the midst of the tumultuous 1960's, he quipped, "What we have before us are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems."¹ Later he noted that "The first and last task

of a leader is to keep hope alive."²

What is the American Dream today, and how can it be enlivened for the twenty-first century? If, as James Truslow Adams wrote back in 1932, the American Dream has held great "hope and promise for mankind,"³ as a whole -- if it includes, in the words of Katherine Lee Bates' 1893 song, a vision of good crowned with brotherhood, a thoroughfare of freedom, and love beyond self -- then how can we further the dream in our own day?

The sociologist Robert Bellah and four colleagues authored a book, published in 1985, about individualism and commitment in American life. Its title, Habits of the Heart, along with much of its inspiration, was derived from Alexis de Toqueville's seminal four volume work, Democracy in America, written in the 1830's. De Toqueville emphasized the religious "point of departure" of the American experiment, going so far as to say, "I think I can see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritans who landed on those shores."⁴ Bellah and his colleagues emphasize "the importance of biblical religion in American culture from the earliest colonization to the present."⁵ According to the authors, a significant part of the success of Martin Luther King, Jr., who's now honored with a national holiday, was his ability to link

republican (with a small "r") themes with biblical themes that resonate deeply with the American populace.⁶ Let's look at some of those biblical themes as we think about revitalizing the American Dream.

In today's gospel lesson from Matthew,⁷ Jesus teaches his disciples about the importance of servanthood over power. The disciples have obviously been vying with each other for pre-eminence -- for greatness. Ten of them get angry with the other two of them who seem to have sought special favor with Jesus -- to sit on his right hand and on his left hand in the kingdom of God to come. As the story is told in Mark's gospel,⁸ it's James and John who ask Jesus directly for this advantage, while in Matthew their mother asks for them. Jesus first of all makes clear that such matters are not for him to grant, but only for his heavenly Father. Then, Jesus contrasts the worldly power of Gentile rulers, who lord it over their people, with the kind of attitude and behavior he wants his disciples to have: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."⁹

When the puritan leader John Winthrop delivered his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" to the colonists of the Massachusetts

Bay Colony on board ship just before they came ashore in America for the first time in 1630, he echoed this morning's gospel lesson and established what Toqueville considered the archetypal vision for America: "We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."¹⁰ Almost 150 years later, Thomas Jefferson would read his Bible to require, as he wrote in the Declaration of Independence, that "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."

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. would then follow, some 200 years later, saying at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, "I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream, that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed -- we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."¹¹ His wife Coretta Scott King commented on this speech afterwards: "At that moment it seemed as if the Kingdom of God appeared. But it only lasted for a minute."¹²

Indeed, it may seem that the American dream comes only in

brief glimpses. John Gardner said, in a foreword to a book by Brian O'Connell, the man who, it turns out, would deliver his eulogy here in Memorial Church: "After Jefferson's brave declaration that 'all men are created equal,' it took eighty-seven years and a bloody civil war to free the slaves, and another fifty-seven years before 'We, the people,' gave women the vote... The American Experiment is still in the laboratory... [Yet] Most Americans welcome the voice that lifts them out of themselves. They want to be better people. They want to make this a better country."¹³ In terms of leadership for America, John Gardner directly refers to the biblical concept of servant leadership in a 1990 book that he dedicates to Brian O'Connell.¹⁴ He cites the same gospel story we're considering this morning, but uses Luke's account: "The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."¹⁵

The problem with the American Dream, and perhaps likewise its strength and endurance as a concept, is that it has many meanings, a number of which appear to contradict each other. When I taught an annual course on moral and spiritual inquiry in business during the 1990's at the Harvard Business School, I would ask my M.B.A.

students how they defined the American Dream. These are some of their answers: Making a lot of money for yourself; a glue that holds the country together beyond ethnicity and national origin; the opportunity to fulfill your own potential and become the best you can be, no matter where you started; a sense of community, from the Mayflower Compact to the wagon trains heading West; individualism and respect for self-reliance and self-discipline; seeking the abiding common values of life like equality and justice for all; a dynamic dissatisfaction that compels one to strive for unreachable goals; selflessness or self-transcendence through love of others; happiness, which everyone has the right to pursue in any way he or she wants; the promise that the next generation will do better than the last; a frontier mentality; sacrifice for the common good.

So what does hold this nation together? Why aren't we flying apart in our diversity and pluralism, the way the former Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia did? Why aren't we engaged in class warfare between rich and poor, bloody ethnic strife, regional civil war of the sort we had in the nineteenth century, gang and mafia-based lawlessness, and internal terrorism? Does it simply have to do with our legal system, our military might, our economic power? Perhaps any and all of these threats are just

around the corner. Or maybe there really is something uniquely powerful about the American Dream, which really does have deep spiritual and religious roots, and ones that can't just be confined to our historical Protestant Christian beginnings.

Katherine Lee Bates' song begins by describing the natural beauty of America, and we certainly live in a land of environmental riches. Just think of our national park system, from the Florida Everglades to the Cape Cod and Point Reyes National Seashores, from Shenandoah to Yellowstone and Yosemite. There's Hawaii's volcanoes and Alaska's Denali, Indiana's Dunes and the Grand Canyon of the Southwest. "This land is your land, this land is my land, from California, to the New York Island,"¹⁶ if only we have a common vision of what we hold in trust as stewards for all of us. Stewards are servants, not lords.

Bates' second verse references pilgrims seeking freedom, but also speaks of America's flaws, calling for self-control and for a confirmation of liberty in law. Pilgrims by definition are on a journey to a holy destination. They are devotees of that which transcends them. They are servants, not lords.

The third verse of "America the Beautiful" shames any conception of the American Dream which would promote personal gain without consideration of others. It speaks instead of loving

country more than self, and of loving mercy more than life. The conception of success should be one of nobleness. Gains should not be for personal profit but for divine purposes. We are asked to be servants of God, not lords of our own lives.

The fourth verse recognizes all the blood, sweat and tears of daily life in this nation, especially in urban America, by envisioning a future "beyond the years" where cities might gleam alabaster, undimmed by human tears. John Winthrop also envisioned a "city set upon a hill"¹⁷ as the ideal community that he and his fellow Puritans were to work towards building. Bates uses the word "dream" in the fourth verse -- not explicitly the American Dream, but a "patriot dream" -- implying that to be patriotic is to serve one's nation as committed citizen, not as a self-interested and self-maximizing individual. We are all to be public servants in that sense, not just lords of our own destiny.

The last verse ends as the first does, praying that God's grace be shed in such a way that brotherhood -- which I read to include human equality and justice and community -- be realized from sea to shining sea. Brotherhood and sisterhood at their best are also servanthood, not lording it over the other.

So, finally, as John Gardner put it, "A great civilization is a drama lived in the minds of a people. It is a shared vision,

shared norms, expectations, and values... If we care about the American Experiment, we had better search out and celebrate the values we share... That we have failed and fumbled in some of our attempts to achieve our ideals is obvious. But the great ideas still beckon -- freedom, equality, justice, and the release of human possibilities... We are capable of so much more than is now asked of us. The courage and spirit are there, poorly hidden beneath our surface pragmatism and self-indulgence... I'm saying that the moment has come."¹⁸

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1. As cited in the order of service of the memorial service held for John W. Gardner at the Stanford Memorial Church on March 5, 2002.
 2. Ibid.
 3. James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1932).
 4. As cited in Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 28.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid., pp. 249, 252.
 7. Matthew 20: 17-28.
 8. Mark 10: 35-45.
 9. Matthew 20: 26-28.
 10. John Winthrop, as quoted in Alexis de Toqueville, Democracy in America, translated by George Lawrence and edited by J. P. Mayer (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1969), p. 46.
 11. As cited in James Melvin Washington, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 219.
 12. Washington, Testament, p. 217.
 13. John W. Gardner, "Foreword: The American Experiment" to Brian O'Connell, Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy (Hanover, N.H.: The University Press of New England, 1999), pp. xi, xiii, xv.

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14. John W. Gardner, On Leadership (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 141.
 15. Luke 22: 26-27.
 16. Woody Guthrie, "This Land is Your Land," (1940)
 17. John Winthrop, cited in Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart, p. 28.
 18. Gardner, "Foreword" to O'Connell, Civil Society, pp. xiv-xvi.