

# THE AMERICAN SOUL

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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As all of you are only too well aware, we're in the midst of an election season. It's an important time for us who are Americans, as well as for citizens of other countries, to take a step back and ask what the basic values of our country really are. At bedrock, what is the soul of America all about? What in the world holds America together? We're such a diverse nation, we've been through our own civil war, we have all kinds of regional differences, and we're constantly absorbing new immigrant populations.

Many countries are held together by an ethnic identity of being, say, Japanese or Turk or Chinese or Russian or Serbian or even French or German. Although America has arguably historically been a melting pot into a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant reality, that hasn't been our conscious self-image. Instead, we've pledged ourselves to "liberty and justice for all." We have sung of our "land of the free" and of "crowning thy good [that's God's good, by the way] with brotherhood from sea to shining sea."

We've always been a very religious nation, from the original settlers who came here for religious reasons to the American of current Gallup polls which show that 96% of us believe in God, actually up a percentage point from 1947.<sup>i</sup> In particular, we've been a nation steeped in the experience of religious minorities from the Puritans of Massachusetts to the Quakers of Pennsylvania to the Catholics of Maryland to the Mormons of Utah, and so much more. Notice that this morning's gospel lesson from Luke<sup>ii</sup> has Jesus dealing with lepers -- what people could have been more marginalized than that -- and then lauding a Samaritan leper ("this foreigner"<sup>iii</sup>) for his faith. That spirit of hospitality is picked up in the inscription on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Written by a Sefardic Jew, it reads: "Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/ I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"<sup>iv</sup>

America is not an ethnicity, or even a people with a common history. America is an idea -- an idea about human hope and human potential. Jacob Needleman in his recent book The American Soul exclaims "American [is] an idea! What other country can say that?"<sup>v</sup> I had the pleasure last winter of interviewing Needleman for Stanford's Aurora Forum series. He explained that American identity has been forged through the notion of being the hope of the world. That hope includes material prosperity, yes, but also the promise of liberty and equality. It includes working together for common safety and security, yes, but much more importantly, a vision of what humanity is and can become -- individually and in community.<sup>vi</sup> Needleman sees all the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution to be based on a vision of something

within ourselves that is higher than the all-too-human desires for personal gain and satisfaction...higher than the instinctive loyalties to family and tribe. This higher reality was called Nature's God externally, and the endowment of conscience or soul within.<sup>vii</sup> "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."<sup>viii</sup>

It's not coincidental, and it's utterly American, that both George W. Bush and John Kerry concluded their convention speeches this summer with virtually identical words. Kerry: "God bless you, and God bless America."<sup>ix</sup> Bush: "God bless you, and may God continue to bless America."<sup>x</sup>

Let's look further at Senator Kerry's and President Bush's stated positions, because it's my observation that their idea of America seems to coalesce much more than is commonly recognized. In the first presidential debate, John Kerry said that America's future, and the world's, belongs to freedom, not to fear. He lamented that freedom is on the march in the world, but not in Russia with Putin's recent concentration of power. George Bush spoke of America's strategy of freedom around the world, about the transformational power of liberty, and of the great benefit of democracy if the Russian people are to realize their aspirations, hopes and dreams. So the value of freedom seems absolutely central to the idea of America, and it has both an individual form and a communal form in the institutions of democracy.

In his convention speech a month ago, President Bush stressed the importance of all Americans having the opportunity to earn a living, support their families, and have a rewarding career. Beyond our shores, he hopes that "Young women across the Middle East will hear the message that their day of equality and justice is coming."<sup>xi</sup> John Kerry spoke of finishing the march toward full equality for all women in our country. And he said: "We believe that what matters most is not narrow appeals masquerading as values, but the shared values that show the true face of America...Opportunity for all, so that every child, every parent, every worker has an equal shot at living up to their God-given potential." He asked for "leadership that's as good as the American dream so that bigotry and hatred never again steal the hope and future of any American."<sup>xii</sup> So both presidential candidates strongly echo Martin Luther King Jr.'s 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."<sup>xiii</sup> The idea of America includes not only liberty but also a deep commitment to equality and justice, starting with equality of opportunity.

Both Bush and Kerry also ground their idea of America, as Thomas Jefferson did in the Declaration of Independence, as a gift of God and under the judgment of God. The President said in his convention speech that he believes that "freedom is not America's gift to the world, it is the Almighty God's gift to every man and woman."<sup>xiv</sup> Kerry spoke of how faith had given him his values and his hope to live by, but he warned of claiming that God is on our side. He quoted Abraham Lincoln as having said about America, "I want to pray humbly that we are on God's side."<sup>xv</sup>

Of course, America has fallen far short of its dream. The idea of America is far from being fully realized. To say "God bless America" or to sing it, or to sing "God shed his grace on thee" as we do in "America the Beautiful" is hopefully always a trembling statement of supplication, not an assumption of fact. It's not "America has God's blessing and we deserve it," but instead "May you, God, please bless America, by showing us your ways" and "May you shed

your grace on us, sinners that we are, and help us to move closer to you." In Irving Berlin's 1938 song, "God Bless America," God is asked to stand beside America and to guide her. In Katherine Lee Bates' 1893 "America the Beautiful" the second and third verses have these lines: "America! America! God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law!" and "America! America! May God thy gold refine, Till all success be nobleness, And every gain divine!"

Yet, America has sinned deeply and continually. The late John Gardner -- renowned social activist, founder of Common Cause, adviser to many U.S. Presidents, memorialized here in this church after his death 2 1/2 years ago -- wrote that "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."<sup>xvi</sup>

Jacob Needleman has a section of his book on The American Soul entitled "The Crimes of America." There he writes about the genocide of our native population and the enslavement of those we forced to emigrate from Africa. Yet, we have made improvements over the years, by continuing to challenge ourselves to realize our own ideals.

So, I suggest that America is really not a nation divided in the sense of red states and blue states. We are really not two separate countries in the United States -- a Bush country and an Kerry Country. Our nation's soul is not divided either. Instead, we have a central idea of America that binds us together. Like any great myth or symbol, the idea of America has layers of meaning, and it's capable of holding opposites in creative tension. We are held together by a few basic values inherent in the idea of America like liberty, equality, hope for the future, and faith that we have been endowed with certain inalienable rights as human beings by Nature and Nature's God. Of course we differ deeply over a number of political issues like abortion, gay marriage, the environment, the war in Iraq, and levels of taxation. Yet, we always base our arguments with each other on this set of deeper values that make up the idea of America. We have the same reference points for our disagreements.

Abortion has to do with women's reproductive freedom and/or with the fetus's inherent right to life. Gay marriage has to do with the inherent freedom of each individual to choose exactly whom to marry, or with a sense of what is natural and what's meant to be (or not) in the order of the universe. Environmental protection requires balancing present liberty rights with our hope for the future. Disagreements over the war in Iraq are a matter both of how best to protect the sanctity of life and of how best to promote freedom at home and abroad. Taxation debates often weigh liberty rights for individuals and groups against interests in social equality and equality of opportunity, all under the umbrella of economic feasibility.

Great symbols and myths work by incorporating dichotomy and paradox, by having the breadth to embrace past, present and future, and by providing a hopeful vision of transformation out on the horizon. Therefore, as John Kerry explained in his convention speech, it's not a matter of an America divided into red states and blue states, but one America red, white and blue. The idea of America belongs to all of us who are American, and is referenced by all of us. America has a soul which we all share.

From a Christian perspective, as the apostle Paul explained in today's reading from his

second letter to Timothy, the word of God is not chained. It is always transformational. "One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all"<sup>xvii</sup> means a nation under God's eternal judgment to become truly one of liberty and justice. We must also remember the idea of America is deeply rooted in a spiritual vision, even as separation of church and state protects pluralism and minority rights.

As we face the upcoming election, I'd like to give John Gardner the final word here -- someone beloved in America by both Republicans and Democrats: "The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive."<sup>xviii</sup> "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."<sup>xix</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Beliefs (Atlanta: Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 17: 11-19.

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 17: 18.

iv. From Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," in Songs of a Semite (1882).

v. Jacob Needleman, The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002), p. 46.

vi. Ibid., p. 3.

vii. Ibid., p. 10.

viii. The Declaration of Independence, The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America (In Congress, July 4, 1776).

ix. John Kerry, speech at the Democratic National Convention as prepared for delivery, Associated Press (July 29, 2004).

x. George W. Bush, speech at the Republican National Convention as prepared for delivery, Indianapolis Star (September 2, 2004).

xi. Bush, convention speech, 2004.

xii. Kerry, convention speech, 2004.

xiii. Martin Luther King, Jr., Address before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, as reported in J.M. Washington (ed.), A Testament of Hope (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p 219.

xiv. Bush, convention speech, 2004.

xv. Kerry, convention speech, 2004.

xvi. 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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<sup>xvii</sup> From the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance.

xviii. As cited in the order of service for the memorial service held for John W. Gardner at the Stanford Memorial Church on March 5, 2002.

xix. Gardner, "Foreword" to O'Connell, Civil Society, pp. xiv-xvi.