



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

May 29, 2016

# **A Great Nation**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

# **A Great Nation**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2016 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: June 3, 2016

*I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations (Revelation 21:22-26).*

On Memorial Day we honor all the men and women who have served our country in the armed forces, and especially those who, as Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg, “gave the last full measure of devotion.” We honor them because we’re grateful for their service, and at the same time we dedicate ourselves to becoming the best nation we can be, so that their sacrifices will not have been in vain.

There’s a lot of talk these days about making America great. Of course we all want our country to be great, but it’s worth asking what exactly we mean by greatness. What makes a nation great, after all? This morning, in the long tradition of sermons on national themes on the occasion of national holidays, I’d like to lift up some perspectives from our Christian faith that might tell us how well we’re doing in the eyes of God and, as our Declaration of Independence says, with “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

Every generation has its challenges, whether we live in a time of war or a time of peace, or, as in our day, a time when relatively small wars are happening abroad with enormous implications not only for the people directly caught

up in them but also for us, here in America. The world has grown so small that what happens anywhere on the planet is likely to affect people everywhere sooner or later.

Franklin Roosevelt said, on his renomination to the presidency in 1936, “There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.” That was certainly true of the World War II generation. I believe it’s also true of ours. While there are some frightening things going on in the world today, as there usually are, surely Roosevelt was right when he said, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

In the face of all our challenges, then, what makes a nation great? One short answer comes from the Old Testament prophet Micah, addressed to the nation of Israel: “He has showed you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” By “justice,” the prophet means treating other people the way we ourselves want to be treated. People who benefit from the way things are may think the system is fair enough already, but the true test of any situation is how it affects those who benefit the least.

Lincoln pointed this out with regard to the institution that led to the Civil War. He said in 1854, “although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, *by being a slave himself.*” Human beings can be quick to explain why other people should be content with conditions they themselves don’t have to face. A great nation is one that does justice by all of its people. Lincoln saw that slavery was not only an evil within our society, but also a threat to

American influence abroad. He said, “We were proclaiming ourselves political hypocrites before the world, by thus fostering Human Slavery and proclaiming ourselves, at the same time, the sole friends of Human Freedom.”

In our day, people who understand international relations talk about the importance of “soft power”—the ways in which a country’s reputation for justice and fairness causes people in other lands to admire and respect and cooperate with that nation, or on the contrary, how the absence of a good reputation makes people in other lands angry and potentially hostile. What Lincoln saw so long ago is vastly more important today, when the whole world is so closely interconnected.

I spent two days last week at the Council on Foreign Relations Workshop on Religion and International Affairs in New York City. There were 130 of us present, from all religious traditions, conservatives and moderates and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, including a handful of American ambassadors. One of the major themes at the gathering, which virtually everyone agreed upon, was that no great nation or any of its leaders should think they can malign and alienate whole populations or religions, including the 1.6 billion Muslims who make up a quarter of the world’s population today and may equal the number of Christians within a generation. To do that sort of thing is not only contrary to the spirit of our religious faith but also potentially a threat to our national security, when we have to rely on people of goodwill everywhere to rein in the most dangerous elements within their own populations.

In 1630, John Winthrop was crossing the ocean to become the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He wrote, “we must consider that we shall be as a City upon

a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” Winthrop took that image from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid....” The governor knew that the world was watching this American experiment, even in the seventeenth century. Today the whole world is not only watching but waiting to respond to whatever our country decides to do. We are by far the most powerful and the most influential nation in the world. By that definition, there’s no question that we are a great nation, but great influence requires great character in the way we relate to the rest of the world.

George Washington emphasized the importance of our reputation from the very beginning. “Happily,” our first president wrote, “the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens....” Washington said, in effect, as long as you live peaceably and abide by our laws, everyone ought to be welcome in the United States of America.

Helen Keller became an inspiring figure a century ago for the ways in which, with the help of compassionate teachers and friends, she overcame tremendous challenges of sight and sound and speech. She said in 1903, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” By 1935 she was known around the world as an American voice of encouragement and hope for people everywhere, and a source of wisdom about what makes a nation great. “The test of a democracy,” she said, “is not the magnificence of buildings or the speed of automobiles or the efficiency of air transportation, but rather the care given to the welfare of all people.”

A great nation may be strong militarily, but military might alone is not enough. Dwight Eisenhower orchestrated the invasion of D-Day and helped bring victory in World War II, then went on to become a five-star general and president of the United States. But as president he said: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.” Eisenhower knew that the military could help to protect a nation, but what makes a nation great is the way it builds up its people. That’s why he supported great projects like the interstate highway system, as well as educational opportunities for everyone from children of color to veterans of the armed services.

What makes a nation great is also a commitment to unity at home, a unity that’s strengthened by respectful differences of opinion, not torn apart by strident self-righteousness. Abraham Lincoln said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” and again he was quoting the words of Jesus. Learned Hand, who was among America’s most respected judges, said in 1944: “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias.”

One of our Westminster members, who spent a career consulting in business, likes to say that harsh facts are friendly. He’s right, of course. Businesses learn to adapt their products and services only when they listen to criticism and face hard facts. In therapy or counseling, people make progress only when they find the courage to face their own

unhealthy habits and behaviors. In the same way, a great nation grows stronger when it acknowledges its mistakes and works to change them.

I've wondered for some time where the evangelist and reformer Sojourner Truth got her unusual name, and the other day I stumbled across the answer. She said, "My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt on em, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins, an' bein' a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare Truth to the people."

A willingness to tell the truth and to hear the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as witnesses promise to do in our courts—is another thing that makes a nation great. The truth is that our history is full of wonderful accomplishments and inspiring traditions and great aspirations, but also some great injustices and some inclinations that have at times diminished us. The topic of our seminar today, coincidentally, is the birth of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction—hardly one of our proudest moments. Telling the truth about the good, the bad, and the ugly is part of what makes a nation great, because it is the truth, as Jesus says, that will make us free.

This election season has been rather ugly so far, and it's not likely to get pretty any time soon. By way of perspective, though, I just finished Ed Larson's book on the election of 1800, called *A Magnificent Catastrophe*. That was our country's first partisan election, which pitted John Adams

against Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, long before Hamilton had his own Broadway musical. In those days the press did not even pretend to be objective, and the insults and fearmongering were at least as vicious as anything we see today. In the end, of course, Jefferson won, after more than thirty ballots were cast in the House of Representatives to break a tie between him and Aaron Burr.

The campaign created a great rift between Adams and Jefferson who, 24 years earlier, had worked so closely together, framing the Declaration of Independence. The conflict between them lasted for many years, but by 1812 these two founders of our country had begun corresponding again. Adams wrote to Jefferson, “You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.” In their final years they became good friends. And then, in one of those peculiar truths of history that can be stranger than fiction, Adams and Jefferson died within a few hours of one another on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Lots of qualities contribute to making a nation great: justice and fairness at home and abroad; military might and the insight to use it wisely; a strong economy with compassion for those who are most vulnerable and an effort to create equal opportunity; a commitment to unity in the midst of differences; openness to the truth; and a deep reliance on the grace of God with a desire to know and do what is right in God’s sight.

In the context of all these qualities we aspire to, some people make the kinds of personal sacrifices we honor on Memorial Day. Most veterans I know tend to be modest about their military service. John F. Kennedy, who was

famous for PT 109 long before he became president, was asked one time how he became a war hero. He answered, "It was involuntary. They sank my boat."

What makes a nation great? It's what the prophet Micah said so long ago: to do just, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

**[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)**