

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 6, 2014
Sermon Title: My Country, 'Tis of _____
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Psalm 72:1-7

Psalm 72

Of Solomon.

*Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.*

*May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.*

*May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.*

*May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

*May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.*

*May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.*

*In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.*

Rachel, our summer intern, and I led worship this week at The Watermark. I do worship there once a month and always emphasize an obvious theme for that month. Christmas in December. Mother's Day in May. So July 4 was an obvious theme for this week. I try to make those services interactive by asking questions, and the three I asked were "What makes a *good* nation?" "How would you *improve* America?" "What do you *love* about America?"

Our opening hymn, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies," got at that a little bit, as did our Scripture. We love America "for beautiful spacious skies, for

amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain." We also love America "for heroes proved in liberating strife, who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!" We love America "for patriot dream that sees beyond the years thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!" We love that hymn. We love that unbridled enthusiasm, that gentle idealism, that delightful wonder, that earnest pride.

It's pretty easy to tell what's good about America isn't it? What's great, what we love and treasure. If we took a survey this morning, we would name freedom, opportunity, grandeur. If we were historians, we might emphasize America as the great experiment, the first true democracy that tackled overwhelming odds and generation by generation dared to be better.

If we were sociologists, we surely would mention America's diversity, the whole world coming to our shores, fitting in, mixing it up, all in pursuit of the many variations of the American Dream. Since we are in church, we can emphasize religious freedom, separation of church and state, our Judeo-Christian foundation, the persistence of faith. All over the world, religion is either in decline or in conflict. Here, religion prospers.

So, yes, America has a lot going for it. We have a lot going for us. But to make this a sermon, we have to go beyond "Rah, rah, America!" Worship is supposed to be about "Rah, rah, God!" But we can bring the two together, just as "America the Beautiful" brings the two together. "America the Beautiful" is "Rah, rah America" with a Godly twist. It says how great we are and begs God to make us better. Think with me about what we sing:

"America, America, God shed his grace on thee;
and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea."

And in case that is too subtle, we also sing, "God mend thine every flaw...
may God thy gold refine."

It is still a beautiful hymn, but it is more provocative than we think. "God shed his grace on thee." Grace is one of the most central teachings of Christian faith. Grace is unmerited love. It is love given to us over and above what we deserve. We have no right to it. We don't deserve it. Yet God gives it to us.

That's why we sing, "Amazing *grace*, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" That too is a beautiful hymn and more provocative than we think. We are so used to singing it that we may gloss over the "wretch" part "Grace ... that saved a wretch like me!"

The song is a confession: I'm a wretch, I'm a sinner. I fall short. I fail. I too often disappoint. I don't deserve God's undying love ... yet, "Amazing Grace."

And so there we were a half-hour ago, a lot of us probably patriotically, enthusiastically saying to God, "America needs Grace." We need help. Why? Because we want to be better than we are! Specifically, according to the hymn, we want God to take our good and make it great. "Crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea." That's a "glass-half-full" statement. We are good, we are saying, but now let's top it, crown it, add something to it, improve it by giving us a true sense of brotherhood from one end of this country to the other, "from sea to shining sea."

I saw the results of a poll yesterday. It said 28 percent of Americans think we are above other nations; 58 percent think we are one of the greater nations; 12 percent think there are other nations better than we are. In other words, most Americans think we're pretty good but can still be better, which is what "America the Beautiful" says.

All I'm doing in this sermon, all we are doing in that hymn is precisely what you and I do all the time — in business, in sports, in family. Much like the Olympic motto, we always aim higher, faster, farther. We start with the positive, and then go to the constructive. That's good parenting, that's good patriotism, that's good religion. It keeps us positive, and it keeps us motivated. The hymn declares, "We're good," and then admits we are still short of "brotherhood from sea to shining sea." Brotherhood means a sense of community, of common purpose, of mutual respect, of an innate unity. I think we would all agree that we could use a bit more brotherhood, sisterhood, humanhood "from sea to shining sea."

The other two phrases are also direct. "God mend thine every flaw. May God thy gold refine." Again, the positive, we're "golden," and the constructive, we need "refining and mending." And refining is done to remove impurities. We talk about "pure gold" all the time. Would you buy something that was advertised as "84 percent pure gold"? No, you would want to know what the other 18 percent is and could they get rid of it, refine it, purify it. The hymn is only stating the obvious. There are some tears in our fabric that need mending. There are some impurities in our gold that need refining. Again that "glass-half-full" thinking! The fabric is good, worth mending! And the gold is precious, worth refining. That's America.

When we did that July 4th worship at The Watermark, I had Rachel read two Scriptures, and they really were the triggers for this sermon. The first was

Psalm 72; the second was Romans 12. Psalm 72 tells us what makes a good leader. Romans 12 tells us what makes a good person. A good country has both. Psalm 72 is addressed to the King, or in our world, to the president, the Congress, first selectman, the state representative, the RTM. Those people who govern. "Give the king thy justice, O, God," the Psalm demands, "may he judge the people with righteousness, the poor with justice, may he defend the poor, give deliverance to the needy and those with no help."

That's pretty clear, isn't it? The job of government is to make sure that the people who are hurting get help. Now, frankly, I could give you a compelling liberal sermon about how to do that; I could give you a compelling conservative sermon about how to do that. What's *not* debatable is that God expects it to get done. So maybe you think the government needs to do more or maybe you think that government needs to get out of the way, but if you are Christian or Jewish, then you expect to insist that either policy leads to "justice for the poor... deliverance to those with no help."

Good government does that, but good government depends on good people, and in Romans 12 we are provided a blueprint for being good people.

"Do not be conformed to the world
Let your love be genuine
Hold to the good,
love one another,
never flag in your zeal.
Hate evil.
Serve the Lord.
Practice hospitality,
pray,
be patient.
Overcome evil with good,
live peaceably with it all."

And here's my favorite verse. It is the absolute motto of our ministry at Greenfield Hill, "Weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice."

I like that list. There's nothing on that's impossible. In other places in the Bible we are told, "Be ye perfect ... do not be angry ... pick up your cross ... lay down your life" those are all daunting demands. But Romans 12 is doable. We can be peaceable, empathetic, hospitable, genuine, loving. We can do that.

The Yankees have this marvelous new pitcher this year, Tanaka. He's so good you just expect him to be good, every game. Just as you expect the

next George Clooney movie to be good, the next Stephen King book to be good, the next Yo-Yo Ma concert to be good, the next Pepe's pizza to be good, the next David Brooks column to be good. The Bible is saying God expects us to be good, God expects our nation to be good. To get there, we have to "mend our flaws," "refine our gold," "crown our good with brotherhood," and be humble enough to know our need for "Grace."

Let me close by using the World Cup as an example. Americans like to boast "USA, USA, we're #1, we're #1!" But America just lost. So we're actually about number 16, and that's not a very inspiring chant, "We're #16, we're #16!" And yet ... and yet, the American soccer team made us proud. They played a thrilling style of game, their individual stories were inspiring, their collective achievements were exciting against the best of the best. They were darn good. And that's not good enough, not for the coach, not for the players, and not for the fans. They want to get better.

Literally within minutes of their final loss, there was talk of how to get better. And not just general talk, but real specifics: what skill sets are missing, who needs to improve, who needs to be replaced, how to get faster down the sidelines, conditioning, all the way to how to improve youth soccer in America.

In other words, American soccer is good, really good. We love them, we take pride in them. Others admire us, people watch us. We're good. And we want to get better. If that attitude is good for soccer in America, it should be good for all of America.

"America, America, God shed his grace on thee,
May God thy gold refine,
God mend thine every flaw,
and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea."