

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: July 5, 2020  
Sermon: "My America"  
Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## 2 Chronicles 7:14

*If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

### LITANY

- Alida: We thank you, God, for this land flowing with the milk and honey.
- David: May our daily lives always show true thanksgiving.
- Alida: Holy God, many came to this land seeking a Promised Land.
- David: May our daily lives fulfill the promise for all our people.
- Alida: Like the ancient Israelites, there are Americans who have known slavery and exile; we know what it means to be an immigrant, a refugee.
- David: May our daily lives honor and embrace all who are here.
- Alida: We remember the Prophets and the Proverbs that had such great expectations for a nation's leaders: to be just, to be righteous, to be faithful.
- David: May our daily lives set the example for our leaders; may our justice, our righteousness, our faithfulness pull them in our direction.
- Alida: We remember Jesus's reminder to render unto Caesar what is rightly Caesar's; and to reserve for God what is rightfully God's.

David: May our daily lives mirror Jesus's teaching, that we might be helpful citizens and worthy disciples.

Alida: We remember God's promise:  
"If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

\*\*\*\*\*

Patriotism is a tricky thing; I suppose it always has been. Millions of people have been lined up against a wall and shot because they were on the wrong side of patriotic fervor. Wouldn't you like to know what life was like in Fairfield around, say, 1772, '73, '74, the lead-up to our July 4, 1776, that celebration of our independence?

There used to be a tavern up here on the Hill and a famous one down by Town Hall. When all those Connecticut Yankee Englishmen got a beer or two under their belts and a taste of rum or hard cider, and they started talking politics and patriotism, how heated did it get as they talked about secession from England, independence, revolution; or loyalty to the King, love of England, national pride? Did one side of the bar start singing "Yankee Doodle," while the other raised a glass to "God Save the King"? Who was the traitor? The patriot? The Lefty? The Right-winger? Who got ostracized, boycotted, punched, told to "go back to where you came from"?

Two hundred fifty years later, my guess is that it's even "iffier" to talk politics at the tavern or anywhere. A friend of mine posted this on Facebook: "I'm a patriot. And I'm sending you a patriotic video every day whether you like it or not!" Think about that. People on your Facebook page are called "friends," right? And yet he felt the need to threaten his "friends" with his patriotism, as if his "friends" aren't patriots. That seems a little unfriendly.

Our Scripture lesson is about patriotism, written 3,000 years ago about ancient Israel. From the tone of it, God wasn't happy. But then again, God's standards are always higher than ours; God's expectations are greater than our own. God actually seems to have more confidence in us, a higher opinion of us, than we do. God just expresses that in a stern, "taskmaster" kind of way. God isn't a "touchy-feely" coach with a pat on the butt and a "go get 'em tiger" encouragement. God is much more of a "shape up or ship out" guy. Thus, God

says in today's Scripture, "If my people shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

There are enough assumptions in there to make us squirm.

- A. The land, the nation needs to be healed.
- B. There are national sins to be forgiven.
- C. There are wicked ways we need to turn from.

And for all have to happen,

- A. Get humble.
- B. Pray.
- C. Seek God's face.
- D. Do that repentance thing: name your wicked ways and turn away from them.

This may be familiar to you. A year ago we printed my essay, "My America." And, at the risk of bragging, it got read a lot. Lots of responses. I did lots of presentations. Very, very thoughtful, faithful discussions. With the challenges facing America today and the divisions even more divisive, we brought "My America" off the shelf to front and center once again. It was last week's Bible Study, and it's today's sermon.

The essay is in two parts. The first half is a memoir, my growing up in a sort of idyllic post-World War II 1950s "We Like Ike" optimism, early rock 'n' roll, and a "can-do" attitude. That morphed into the harsher realities of the 60s and 70s, onto the challenges and issues of the 21st century. The second half is the Biblical prescription for going forward, for being better.

Based on that verse Alida just read: "Humble yourselves. Pray. Seek God's face. Turn from the wicked ways." But how do you apply that to a nation?

Most of our religious life looks at us as individuals. How can you or I be a better person by some Biblical measure or other? How can you or I "go the extra mile," "be merciful," "feed the hungry," "not bear false witness," "honor our mother and father," be more "patient and kind", and so on. But this Old Testament 2 Chronicles 7:14 verse is addressed to the whole nation, the entire people of a nation.

How then do we as a nation "humble ourselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from our wicked ways"? So in my essay I looked at each step and applied it to America. First, I mentioned that the most humble people I've met are veterans. And I talked about the best athletes, the best students, the best at anything, they are "teachable," we are told, "coachable." That's humility.

Second, I talk about the beautiful phrase, "to seek God's face," as an invitation to intimacy: to be immersed in God's presence, and God immersed in your presence. Nothing hidden.

And then, third, the toughest part, really the result of humility and praying in God's face, the toughest part is to name our wickedness. To say out loud what our blind spots or failures, our wickednesses are.

That, the naming of our wickedness, may be harder than turning away from it. Once we've had the spiritual guts to name our fault lines, we may be motivated to turn away from what we've already said out loud is wrong. I'll give you an easy example: which is tougher to do? To tear down a Confederate statue? Or to understand that America, from Maine to Texas, had slaves, profited from slavery, condoned it, turned a blind eye toward it, and continued a master/slave mindset long after the Confederacy ended?

We've seen it with our own eyes. It takes only minutes to tear down a statue. But we've been facing the roots and fruits of slavery for 400 years. And yet, America has repeatedly improved itself. In our opening hymn, so beloved by Americans, "America the Beautiful," we boldly, proudly, with no hesitation, sing, "God mend thine every flaw . . . May God thy gold refine."

That's half of today's Bible verse right there: humble ourselves and pray. We are admitting to God our "every flaw" and our need for "refinement." O.K., the fourth step dares us to name them. What are our flaws? What impurities in our gold need to be refined? When we name them, we usually fix them.

I'll give you three examples: cancer, gay rights, kids with "special needs." Even when I was a young pastor, you couldn't say the word "cancer." Someone would say to me, "Please pray for Mary Sue. She has (and then they'd lower their voice to a whisper), she has 'the C word,'" as if it was a dirty word.

Now we have pink ribbons. The Connecticut Challenge and Rose of Hope luncheon are central to our community's public war on cancer. We have awareness and compassion. It is out and about publicly, no shame.

The same is true with gay rights. For the first half of my life, homosexuality was a bad thing. The religious world called it an "abomination," a sin. The psychiatry and psychology professions listed homosexuality as one of the mental disorders they could treat. The political world railed against the "homosexual agenda." Today, gay people are married, raising families, living Christian lives, fulfilling civic duties in the military, leading and serving with pride in every sphere of life.

This social revolution includes how we've treated people with physical and intellectual challenges, people with special needs. We used to use words that were offensive and hurtful, and we knew they were awful; that's why we used those old words as insults on the playground. Most often, special-needs youngsters were hidden away, barely known or acknowledged. Today, these youngsters and adults are embraced, welcomed, celebrated, included, living joyful, independent lives. You see, we can learn, we can change, we can be better.

Christianity and America should be a perfect match; they are both self-improvement movements. At our best we are not looking over our shoulders with nostalgia, wishing for some romanticized good old days. We are an "on the go," "move forward" people.

Unfortunately, there are three forces at work that are recipes for going nowhere. In my essay, I call them "can't do" attitude, third-railism, and hyper-partisanship.

The most obvious current example is "facemasks." How on earth did facemasks become a political football, a partisan issue, a litmus test of patriotism? At some point, don't we just want to take people over our knee and spank them? Or wash their mouths out with soap? Or make them stand in the corner? Or write on the blackboard a thousand times "I will never be stupid again!"?

I said this a few weeks ago in another sermon: "We are better than that!" That's why the Bible calls Jesus "the author and perfecter of our faith." (Hebrews 12:2) Jesus always provokes us toward that Olympic motto: "Citius, Altius, Fortius." "Faster. Higher. Stronger." Always improving.

It's not unpatriotic to humbly, through intimacy with God, be able to name our wickedness. That is love of country. That is love of others. That is love of yourself. That is patriotism. One of the most visual statements Jesus made asked, "How can you take the speck out of someone else's eye when you don't see the beam in your own?"

That's a Biblical parallel to what the flight attendants say in their safety instructions before takeoff. "In the case of turbulence, the oxygen masks will drop down from overhead. Be sure to put yours on first before helping your child." Take care of the beam in your eye, the blind spot in your life, the issue confronting you first. Make yourself, as a citizen, make yourself, as an American, the best version of yourself you can be. That's patriotic.

This week, I was walking the campus of Fairfield U. It was a hot as heck. I'm sweating like a pig, and there's this girl over on the field hockey field all by

herself doing her drills: sprinting, shooting, dribbling, over and over and over. So I went over to her, and I asked her, "May I ask what you're doing? It's hot! You're all by yourself. You don't even know if there will be field hockey this fall. What drives you?" In all honesty, she beamed, she beamed the beam of someone doing the right thing only because it is the right thing. "I want to be at my best," she told me. "I want to be always able to do my best." "For me and my team."

You tired of division in America? You tired of selfishness? Political shenanigans? Let me tell you, when more of us are like that 16-year-old field hockey player, we will be "America the Beautiful".

That's "My America."