

Sermon for Sunday, July 4, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"THE BIRTH AND REBIRTH OF A NATION"

St. Luke 5:11-24

Text: "...for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.
And they began to make merry." --St. Luke 15:24

Watergate and the recent sex scandals in Washington have not made America sick. Instead, they are only evidences of a creeping illness that has now become evident to all of us. It would be foolish of us to deny the sickness that grips our country as we come today to celebrate her 200th birthday. America has enough detractors, but we would do our nation and ourselves a disservice to pretend that all is well. It is hard to know how and when the trouble started, but it is evident to all that the patient is running a high fever.

Perhaps it began when we encouraged a general disrespect for any kind of authority by urging people to obey their own impulses in the name of freedom. Perhaps it had its beginning when we began to hamper the enforcement of the criminal code with decisions that slow down the judicial process. Surely a part of the illness came when we created a general distrust of law enforcement officers--or when we began to import vast supplies of hallucinogenic drugs, made them available to the youth of the land, and gave them plenty of money to buy them. Surely our sickness was hastened when we divided the country into ethnic groups and then incited insurrections by each group with the intent to launch a general civil war. Certainly our sickness has been intensified by loosening all restraint on the entertainment media so that sexual license may be presented to the public in its rawest form. Our illness has been hastened by using the mass media to make normal marriages and relationships appear dull, while every form of adultery and perversion is made to seem fascinating and exciting. And it hasn't helped our national health to convince minority elements in the population that justice can never be secured by them through the process of law, but only by revolution. It hasn't helped to divide the older and the younger generations by encouraging them to distrust and to condemn each other. And the sickness has been hurried along as we have polluted the air, the streams, and the lakes; while we have eroded the land until the environment is so poisoned that life can hardly be enjoyed. Worst of all, there have been those practioners of quackery who have indoctrinated the public into believing that we have outgrown the need for the church, that Jesus is a myth, that Christianity is the residual of a bygone superstition, and that morality is doing what you please. (Paraphrase of an editorial from Decision Magazine.)

But whatever the sources of our national illness, those of us who love America must not ignore her pains nor pretend that her fever does not exist. In many respects America is like the prodigal son in our scripture for this morning. Like the younger son, America as a new nation was blessed with much. Yet, America has also left the Father; it has left the spiritual moorings out of which it came; it has abandoned the homestead of God. As a consequence, like the prodigal son, we have wasted our substance in riotous living. For example, many of our natural resources have already been abused, misused, and depleted. The easy-to-reach oil has already been pumped out, the easily mined iron ore and copper ore are gone and what is left is more difficult to get and more expensive to process. And, like the prodigal son whose former friends offered him no assistance, nations around the world who owe so much to America now deride us, decry us and deny us.

What is the remedy for the illness of America? Is there any cure for the problems that plague us? Is there any hope for the patient? I would say to you that we should have the same hope for America that the father had for his prodigal son. Imagine for a moment that you are the father of that boy who has taken his inheritance from your hand and gone off to a far country. Word comes back to you of how he is living, of the things he is doing, of the way he is acting. Because you are a father made wise by experience, you know what the inevitable consequence will be for your boy. You can well predict that he will indeed end up in the pigpens. What hope would you have for your son? What could you count on to redeem your boy? Well, it seems to me there are two things you would count on.

First, you would count on the fact that your boy wasn't totally bad. After all, you had trained him and schooled him and taught him. Surely it was not all wasted; surely you could count on some of those virtues you inculcated in him to surface. And, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what happened to the prodigal son. Eventually, as the Bible puts it, he came to himself. By the same token, I think we can count on America because in spite of our problems, our sickness, our prodigality, there is much about us that is truly noble and good and worthwhile.

A nation is not totally bad when in education there are more children attending more schools with better facilities and receiving a better education than any nation in the world. We are not without hope totally when in the past fifty years life expectancy has been increased by fifty percent, when polio, typhus, diphtheria, smallpox and other dread diseases have been virtually eradicated. We are not totally depraved when in science we have developed a worldwide communications system, launched satellites to forecast weather, perfected nuclear energy for the benefit of mankind, and have landed men on the moon and safely returned them to earth. This country is not without some hopeful prospect when in labor more Americans own stock in more corporations than ever before, when more persons are employed, working shorter hours, working under better conditions, earning more money, enjoying more leisure time, will have more to eat and more to wear and enjoy more luxuries than any peoples in the history of the world.

I am sure that the prodigal son, when he found himself in the self-made garbage of a pigpen, found many scoffers and detractors and critics. Yet, in spite of his failures, he still had within him those qualities that would eventually rescue him from his plight. By the same token, while America has problems with pigpens of our own making, I am convinced there are qualities within that are capable of reclaiming our nation. For that reason one of the remedies for our present malaise is some good, old-fashioned patriotism. I hope we can still stand up proudly with our hands on our hearts when the flag goes by in the parade and I hope we still get tears in our eyes when they play the national anthem, even if it is at the football game, and I hope we can still have chills down our spines when we face the flag and say the pledge of allegiance. You see, when a person is sick, he needs nursing and loving and tending and medicating. Our country on its 200th birthday is seriously ill and I'm tired of hearing my country run down, tired of wallowing in shame for being American, tired of critics who enjoy our affluence they didn't help to create but who are quick to condemn, tired of cynical attitudes towards patriotism, and I'm tired of those who earnestly desire the death of my country to replace it with socialism or something worse. In that far country, living with the pigs, the prodigal needed a friend. By the same token, this country could use some patriotic friends to nurse it in its illness.

So, if you imagined yourself as the father of a prodigal son, one thing you would count on would be that he was not all bad. I think the second thing you would

count on if the prodigal was your son is this: if he did come home again, you would welcome him with open arms. Do you think God would do any less for this country?

At heart, our problem in America is a spiritual problem. It is a spiritual problem when pornography becomes the right of the free press, but that same freedom of the press does not include the right to read the Bible on school grounds. It is a spiritual problem when perverted entertainers deluge the home with their condemnation of our moral standards. It is a spiritual problem when you are afraid of taking your family to the movies for fear of exposing them to nudity, homosexuality and the glorification of narcotics. It is a spiritual problem when we see the decline of personal honesty and personal integrity of which Watergate and the sex scandal in Washington are but symptoms. If America is to get well and return to health, we must experience a spiritual revival, a spiritual renewal. And this is not something that begins with your neighbor or the other fellow, but it must begin with you and it must begin with me. If we want to see our nation return to God, we must lead the way and each of us return to Him ourselves.

Let me share with you something that I think is very appropriate at this point. It is written by a man named Nat Olsen and was printed in the Christian Reader. "A certain Father had two worlds, the Old World and the New World. One day the younger said, 'Father, give me of my inheritance; make me rich, spiritually and materially.' And the Father blessed the New World until it became the envy of the Old. It enjoyed a standard of living undreamed of in the history of mankind. Less than two hundred years later, however, the New World ignored the Father and took a long journey into the wilderness of materialism and sensuality. There it wasted its substance with riotous living. And when it had spent all, there arose great shortages throughout the land...shortages of grain, of oil, or electrical power. And none of the nations the New World had helped in its days of prosperity offered any assistance. At last, the New World came to its spiritual sense and said, 'Why should this generation perish from hunger? God who helped Washington at Valley Forge and Lincoln at Gettysburg is still alive today. Let us arise and go to our Heavenly Father and say, 'Father, we have sinned against heaven and before you. We are no more worthy to be called a Christian nation; make us as one of the lesser nations of the earth.'"

"And Americans arose and returned to God."

"The Heavenly Father had compassion on Americans said, 'You are forgiven. Come and rejoice in your new-found fellowship with your Father. Bring forth a bountiful harvest from your amber fields of grain. Bring forth your oil and natural resources from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Bring me the fatted calves from your wide and open ranges. Let us eat and be merry, for this my New World was spiritually dead but now is alive; it was lost but now is found.'"

This nation had its birth when the Pilgrims came here to worship God. This nation will have its rebirth when we pilgrims in a spiritual wilderness return to God of our Fathers.

In 1776 a man named Nathaniel Ames of Dedham, Massachusetts, wrote a letter to the yet unborn Americans of 1976. In that letter he spoke of how America would grow and prosper and become great. He said that all of this would happen because of the brave men and women of his day who would save this country. As he finished his

letter, this is what he wrote to you and me... "O! Ye unborn inhabitants of America..
..when your eyes behold the sun after he has rolled the seasons round for two
centuries more, you will know that we dream'd of your times."

A hundred years from today--two hundred years from today--let there be a free America then, an America that is spiritually strong. Let it be so because we have ministered to the ills of a nation we love; let it be so because we have returned as a nation to our heavenly father. And let us leave such a heritage in this great land of our that we can say to our children's children, "you will know what we dream'd of your times."