

“Patriot Dream”

Luke 10:1-11

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In 1893, 33-year-old Katherine Lee Bates, an English professor, poet, and activist at Wellesley College, took the train to Colorado Springs, Colorado, for a summer teaching assignment. The trip inspired her to write the poem that would become the lyric for this morning’s closing hymn.

When one travels west from Massachusetts the trees fall away and you notice the widening, “spacious skies.” She passed through Chicago (a gleaming alabaster city) and over the “amber waves of grain” in Kansas. She saw the “fruited plains” from the “purple mountain majesty” of Pikes Peak.

Ours is a beautiful country—“from sea to shining sea”—and this poem married to melody captures not only the beauty we see when we look in any direction, but also the love many of us feel for our nation. We are a blessed nation, it would seem. I certainly feel blessed to be a native son.

But this national song hints at national pain.

The “good” and the “brotherhood” about which we sing and for which we strive is a goal that we have yet to achieve. And so, we still reach. We reach to mend the divisions that make this a nation of agitated special interests and angry groups and parties. We still strive to be one family with the native Americans from whom my family took this nation: the Kecoughtan, the Powhatan, the Occohannocks, and the Onancocks.

My family didn’t bring slaves, but the Parramores soon owned slaves. Dealing in the slave trade did much to sicken our ideal of national brotherhood. And we strive, still, to recover from that sickness, that badly polluted well.

This national song hints at pain and underscores the need for reform.

America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

And this song for us I hope and think is prayer: May God, indeed, “refine” the “gold” of both natural and human resource, and that all our “success” be measure *not* by economic or other metrics, but by “nobleness”—

Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!

* * *

In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus headed to Jerusalem for what he knew would be his crucifixion, one wonders what he would see from his view on the mountain at the edge of town called Golgotha (in Latin, “Calvary”). Were the plains ready for harvest? Did Jerusalem gleam in afternoon sun? Did he see the dusty

roads that rolled away from Jerusalem into the hills. Was he reminded of the towns he visited along those roadsides and the people he met? Did he see their faces?

He had preached a “brotherhood” that included women. He had preached “family,” but it was a family not defined by the blood of ancestry or national affiliation but by allegiance to God; this definition of family included outsiders, lepers, Romans, prostitutes, and Samaritans, not just God’s chosen of which Jesus was a part.

He preached God’s kingdom, which meant, I think, “Kin-dom”—that is, a family for all nations and a relationship with all people where praise and justice reigned, and God, no emperor, was supreme. He didn’t preach boundaries, but about how because of his very blood, the dividing wall of hostility would tumble down.

He equipped his friends to go out, two by two, to welcome others into this family devoted to peace, to welcome, and to justice for the poor.

Nations, naturally, think of their borders and their national interests. Nations celebrate birthdays and historic milestones. This is good and fun and worthwhile. But Jesus got the people of his day—and of ours—to think bigger than our clan and our region. God’s Kingdom/Kin-dom is not divided by national borders or interests. And for the Christian, national loyalties never, ever replace or come before loyalty to God, who cares for the whole world, which Jesus came, in God’s name, to redeem.

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I was moderating a DREAAM House board meeting two weeks ago here at church. DREAAM is a ministry that you helped found that serves boys in our community.

At some point in our work, Mr. Turner, a member of the board, said he had something he had to share. He said he was troubled by what our nation was doing at the border with immigrants. Separating children from their families. Incarcerating them. You could hear the ache in his voice.

DREAAM cares about and provides programming for local children, not for children on the border. But he can’t think about our local work without thinking about children elsewhere.

He had no answers. He made no motion. DREAAM’s reach simply does not go that far. In fact, technically speaking, Mr. Turner was out of order even to bring this up. We had a full docket of local business to get through.

But his reflective pause gave us all cause to remember that we are part of a bigger family. Our local work cannot be done without thinking of wider need. And that when others suffer, we all suffer. As we appear to be blessed in a meeting in the air-conditioning of Westminster Hall, we are called to be a blessing to others who appear to be less blessed. And to those to whom much is given, much is required. In this way Mr. Lou Turner brought into focus the agony Jesus may have felt when, from that mountain, he saw a world so fractured by division.

And our call is to go out, two by two, to preach a better way forward. In this way we best join that patriot dream . . .

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine,

Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!

Luke 10:1-11 1After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. 2He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. 3Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. 4Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. 5Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' 6And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. 7Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. 8Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; 9cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 11'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.'