

July 2 Sermon – Mirror Mirror

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator, with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Sound familiar? (assess responses) Now let me ask you another question. As a society, how are we doing with this? (assess responses)

This morning, we read two scripture passages about using what we have to help others. The first, from Matthew, talks about sharing not only our possessions but also our space with others. The second discusses taking pride in our freedom but using that freedom for good rather than hiding behind it. Did I choose these passages on purpose for this particular weekend? You’d better believe it.

I don’t know about you, but in my adult life, I’ve struggled with July 4, which is ironic considering it’s my birthday. In my youth, it was always a day to don my red, white, and blue and head out to my grandparents’ cottage to swim, grill out, and eat my traditional flag cake with blueberry stars and stripes of strawberries and raspberries. When I started to get older, however, and especially when I became lucky to have opportunities to travel internationally, I started to look at the idea of patriotism differently. I looked at everything I had, so much more than others had, and at the myriad of people who had so much less. I started to wonder what I as an individual, and especially what we as a country, could do to help others more and what we took for granted. For quite some time when I was younger, the concept really bummed me out and at times, angered me. Over time, I’ve come to realize that rather than treat this holiday as an either good or bad, what we could do is treat it like looking into a mirror, where even though what comes back is an exact replica of ourselves, our minds allow us to focus on a combination of what we like and what we’re not so fond of. In doing this as a nation, we can move forward in a way that could yield more results for all.

So, how do we start this self-reflection? Well, if you’re part of our family, we do a lot with music, so I thought we could use today’s opening song as a jumping point. *America the Beautiful* was originally written as a poem titled Pike’s Peak by Katherine Lee Bates during cross-country train ride she took in 1893. The hymn to this tune was written by church organist Samuel A. Ward on a ferry boat ride from Coney Island back

to New York City and then published in 1892, a year before Bates wrote the poem. Now, here's the interesting part of the story. Katherine Lee Bates and Samuel A. Ward never met. Bates' poem grew in popularity and many musicians composed various melodies for it. Ward's tune was initially used as a variation on the old hymn *Old Mother Dear, Jerusalem*. It was actually a publisher who, in 1910, united the words to Bates' popular poem with Ward's music. Unfortunately, Ward died in 1903, so he never got to see how famous his tune would become. Fortunately for Bates, she WOULD get to see the popularity her poem would achieve before her death in 1929. So why go into this history? The story of this song shows us that great things can happen when people contribute little bits at a time, even if they don't know each other.

Let's look at some of the lyrics to the song itself and see what this does for our mirror mirror reflection. "Oh beautiful for spacious skies." If you look up into the sky, does there appear to be an end to it? No. I've always found it fascinating that two people could be looking at the same sky from various parts of the world. In fact, if you've ever seen the movie *An American Tail* where the little mouse Fivel sings the song *Somewhere Out There*, you know exactly what I mean. We're all connected, in the world, in our country, in our community. When we help one person, the ripple effect can be astronomically good, but we must also remember that the opposite applies. If we take, take, take in one part of the world, the give, give, give has to come from somewhere. In choosing the two scripture passages today, I was reminded of a favorite movie quote where two people are discussing the idea of faith and why there is still suffering in the world. When one character says that "without suffering, there'd be no compassion," the response she receives is to "tell that to those who suffer." Perspective. The beautiful thing about those spacious skies is that they remind us that there is room here and resources for everyone, also reminding us of the words we all grew up hearing our parents say. Make sure you share.

The next three lines of *America the Beautiful* kind of follow a theme: amber waves of grain, purple mountain majesties, fruited plain. Two of these three things discuss an abundance of food, and all three point to an image of our nation being made better by having a variety of colors. Interestingly, the words of the original poem by Katherine Bates discuss not a fruited plain but an enameled plain. I don't know about

you, but I much prefer the idea of seeing a plain filled with various fruits to a perfect one covered in the purity of enamel. Let's extend this colorful image from the colors in nature to our nation's people. How beautiful of a place do we have because of the beautiful variety of people of people who live here! How much more beautiful is it when everyone feels welcome here regardless of who they are, what they look like, and who they love.

This seems like a good place to return to a question I asked at the beginning. As a country, how are we doing? Let me follow that up with this. Have we come a long way? Yes. Is there still work to do? Absolutely. Is more progress attainable with work? Of course. I recently saw an interview with the daughter of civil rights leaders Medgar and Merlie Evars as this June was the 60th anniversary of Medgar's assassination. In discussing the inspiration of her parents and her faith that has driven her to continue their fight, Reena Evars said this. "Faith makes things possible, not easy." What a remarkable statement! You see, our faith gives us that driving force to do the hard work to better our fruited plain for everyone.

So, what is the hard work that we do here? Answering that question is like looking in that mirror we're referencing today. It's so easy to see things we wish were different or that we could do just a little better. However, we must first look at all of the good that we as a church do. There's the community meal, an event that brings together so many people and provides for those who need it, both nutritionally and socially. There's the recycling program that makes sure we're wasting as little as possible. I can assure you that there are many churches who either don't recycle at all or don't recycle nearly as much as they should. Then there's our status of being an open and affirming church. This, to me, is one of the most important qualities we have. In putting together this service, a realization hit me. How interesting is it that Independence Day comes immediately after Pride Month! When every person in this country is allowed to be comfortable in their own body and relationships and allowed to be proud of who they are, the freedom of Independence Day will truly mean freedom for all. That's where we come in. By being open and affirming, we are showing not only our community but all of northern Michigan that we truly live the words "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

There are just a few remaining lyrics I'd like to focus on, and they come from the chorus sections of the first two verses. They are "God shed His grace on thee," "God mend thine every flaw," and "Thy liberty in law." These three lines remind us that we're not alone. They, like the Reena Evars quote I mentioned earlier, remind us that our God and our faith are there to support us when we feel downhearted. The line "and crown thy good with brotherhood" reminds us that we have the support of each other to affect change. They remind us through the grace we've received, it truly is possible to attain liberty for all.

We have been blessed to live in a great place. We have been gifted freedoms by those who have come before us, and there are many in this room and watching at home who have worked hard to guarantee freedoms for others. As we celebrate this week, let us be thankful for what we have, let us be grateful to those who have done the work before us, and let us remember the unity we have with others in the world. Let us live in ways that will better our planet, our community, and our country for all, so that we can truly be a place for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness from sea to shining sea.

Amen.