

**WHAT GOOD IS RELIGION? E PLURIBUS UNUM
PROVERBS 22:1-2, 7-8, 21-22; MARK 7:24-37
SEPTEMBER 10, 2006 – RALLY DAY
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E Pluribus Unum, “out of many, one”; proposed by Jefferson, Adams and Franklin for the Great Seal of the United States in 1776, approved in 1782. You can find it on the back of a one dollar bill with a magnifying glass inscribing the banner held in the eagle’s beak.

The other Latin phrases on the *reverse side* of the Great Seal—both sides of which are on the back of a dollar bill—also proposed by the founders have to do with God blessing the endeavors of the new nation.^[1]

It is not surprising the early colonists thought God was on their side. They came to this country because of religious persecution. Their attitude was “we’ll show merry old, corrupt England how to be a Christian society.” The piety was so strong they thought of themselves as a New Israel in a new wilderness, North America; escaping the oppression of the new Egypt, England under the new pharaoh, England’s king.

But E Pluribus Unum is different than the other two Latin phrases. It is less about God blessing the new nation than it is a prayer for unity among a diverse people in crisis.

Some say it is a miracle the thirteen colonies ever made it past the Revolution into the nineteenth century in one piece given vast religious and regional differences.

The founders were clear: if the fledgling nation had any hope for survival it would come only if the people could rally together in cause and purpose. Disliking the king was not enough. There had to be a compelling bond—something deeper than dislike, more altruistic than the shared struggle for survival in the new world.

E Pluribus Unum has been from our beginning our mantra to be and become something more than just the sum of our parts: a call for unity on the eve of Revolution, a call for unity under Lincoln, not against an external enemy but the internal enemy and scandal of slavery and Civil War.

Today, five years after 9/11, in the face of deep division and disagreement about the direction of the nation E Pluribus Unum calls us to stand together once again.

What we are struggling with today is not the king of England or competing states but a moral issue. And the moral issue is this: we participate in a way of national life that allows professional athletes and corporate CEOs to earn millions of dollars while the working poor cannot work enough jobs in 24 hours to house and feed their families. That is immoral. What good is any American religion—Christian, Jewish or Muslim—that does not address the immorality of our economic structure?

In a nation where such disparities exist I’d like to focus next week on how followers of Jesus anchor themselves in him so that we make a difference for good. And since we do not seek to make a difference for good by ourselves as Christians, in week three I want to explore the conversation and life we share with followers of other faith traditions.

The role of religion in our national life is a fascinating story. From a line in the sand dividing the colonies, to a galvanizing influence shaping national values, to an instrument used to manipulate for political gain religion clearly matters.

What is the role of religion in our national life today? It is a subject of much interest if you check the best-seller list. I am not pretending to answer that question in the space of a sermon, but at this start of the new program year I want to put it on our radar because how we answer that question will shape our mission and outreach. How we view religion in public life at this critical juncture of national history can support the founders' call to be united in times of crisis.

There is much current disagreement about the direction of the nation. Much of it focused on the war in Iraq as the recent primary election debate revealed. Some say the enemy is terrorism. Terrorism is a global menace. But to focus on the war and terrorism as the primary enemy of the nation and to advocate a particular way of fighting that war and enemy with ominous consequences if we don't, deflects attention from what is happening in the nation itself.

What is happening is an entrenched stratification of our society into socio-economic classes—with fewer at the top, a dwindling middle and more and more at the bottom.

In the last twenty years, 91% of the increase in America's wealth went to 20% of the wealthiest Americans and over half of that increase went to the richest 1%. When the richest one percent own more wealth than the entire bottom 95%, that is the kind of aristocracy because of whom the pilgrims fled England. Recent estate tax laws ensure that this disproportionate wealth will continue at the expense and on the shoulders of the poor and middle class.^[ii]

Whole cities are becoming enclaves of the rich. New York, Portland and Bakersfield, CA were cited in a study this summer of a national trend in which some cities are too expensive for any but upper middle and upper class residents. In these three cities, over 40% of residents are in what is considered upper class, over 40% are of the lower class serving the wealthy and less than 20% of residents in these cities are middle class.^[iii]

If you have had to contend with the \$60 cab fare (including tip) from JFK to Manhattan lately you know what I'm talking about. Some cities are just not places most people can afford to live unless they are willing to dwell in harsh conditions.

Class also affects personal health. Recent studies conclude that upper-class Americans are less likely than middle-class Americans to develop and die from diabetes, stroke, heart disease and many types of cancer. In turn, middle class Americans experience far better health than the poorest Americans.^[iv]

It doesn't take studies to tell us what we already know. My question for us today is why do we seem so paralyzed to do anything about it? These statistics are dismaying for a nation founded on the principle that the pursuit of happiness and liberty are inalienable rights. When Jefferson chose the word "inalienable" he wanted to convey that these rights are given to every human being by God and while they can be denied they cannot be revoked by any political party or president.

I admit to being at odds with the present administration on many issues, yet these trends started and have been gathering speed over the past several administrations. They are bigger than any one political party or president. It would be grossly naive to suggest that the party in power is sinful alone.

What is the role of religion in our national life? Let's start with the Gospel. Jesus preaches a coming of the kingdom of God that will sweep away all forms of gross class disparity and elitism. Indeed, the class differences that make some rich and some poor, some free and some slaves, some secure and some held fast by fear and insecurity, are to be replaced by abundant life for all, with no one lording it over another.

In Jesus' conception of the kingdom, there can be no social or economic classes. In parable after parable Jesus preaches that God equally welcomes everyone to the great banquet table of the kingdom and offers its fare to all in equal measure.

Class barriers deny complete and unlimited access to the fullness of the social and economic good that God has bestowed upon humanity. Maintaining class barriers in practice and policy violates the politics of Jesus.^[v]

This point is made clearly in today's story from Mark. Jesus' encounter is with a Gentile, a Syrophenician. He was operating just beyond the borders of his own land—one of the occasions when he went beyond the limits of Israel.

The woman he encounters does not follow Jewish law. She is a desperate parent. She acknowledges Jesus with his full title: Lord, Son of David—like the frame of mind I had when I was desperate a month ago, pulled over by a police officer for speaking on my cell phone in the car. I used the word “sir” and “officer” about ten times in two sentences. I was desperate. I know what desperation feels like.

When you're desperate you get humble fast. And while there is much in this story that commends our study for an appropriate posture and approach to God I want to give Jesus some credit today. I want to acknowledge that he practices what he preaches and reaches out beyond the bounds of the chosen people to this poor woman of another faith.

Time after time, Jesus reaches out to those on the other side of any barrier—social, economic, gender, religious or geographic. All are welcome to meet and follow him and to experience grace and healing. Talk about getting out of our geographic comfort zones, how many of us have even set foot on Ferguson Ave.?

The reading from Proverbs speaks directly to the matter of economic barriers. It contains if/then causality of behavior and conduct. “The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all”....therefore “those who are generous are blest for they share their bread with the poor”....thus “do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils the life of those who despoil them.”

What we hear in both the Gospel and Proverbs this morning confirms what Thomas Jefferson observed all those years ago when he said that we are each endowed with certain inalienable rights by God. We allow the barriers of class that currently deny those rights to many Americans to continue at our own peril. God is good. Justice will prevail.

So what's a good, well-heeled congregation like Westminster to do? We are called to remember the national motto and join in solidarity with the poor of our city and nation. To support, for example, our outreach on the West Side of Buffalo: mentoring small businesses, tutoring children, building new homes. But that's just a beginning.

If the role of religion has any relevance for a society stratified by class privilege it has to do not just with what we do for the poor as laudable as that might be, it has to do also with the extent that we are willing to tolerate or change the existence of economic and class barriers in our society.

Are we just building houses for worthy poor folks or are we striving to give more and more people access to the banquet table of the American dream? If it is the latter then there are certain candidates we will choose and support for public office and certain policies we will advocate at every level of government. But that too is only a start.

Jefferson, Adams and Franklin got their famous phrase, E Pluribus Unum either from their reading of Augustine's *Confessions* where the great saint uses the phrase to describe friendship or from Virgil's famous poem using the phrase to refer to the blending of cheese, garlic and herbs in a popular recipe.^[vi]

I would suggest to us today it is not enough to just tutor children of poverty or build homes for urban poor or assist fledgling entrepreneurs to start new businesses. Nor is it enough to support the kind of policies that open up rather than close down the opportunities and abundance of America for all people.

What we are called to do is to dwell together as brothers and sisters, regardless of class. And given the stratification of class on Sunday morning across America that may be every bit as daunting as mounting a successful ministry on the West Side or passing legislation that shares the wealth with more than a few. Wouldn't it be a sign of our faithfulness if the complexion of this congregation became a mosaic of color and class? A tapestry of the city itself—rich and diverse and multi-cultured!

Perhaps the place to start this morning is our own lives, with a personal inventory of our friends and acquaintances. How socially, economically, racially diverse are they?

If you're like me, those relationships tend to cluster around service people rather than penetrate your core community. I don't think that's the way God wanted it. I think God envisioned that we would dwell together as brothers and sisters.

If we put our hearts and minds to it, I'll bet we could make fast friends with people of different backgrounds and circumstances and as a congregation taste as excellent in community as one of Virgil's omelets. Amen.

^[i] Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, New York: Random House, 2006) 81.

^[iii] Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. "Class, Political Conservatism and Jesus," *Cross Currents*, Fall 2005, 304-321. Also, Gloria Albrecht's, "Class on Sunday," from the same issue of *Cross Currents*. Statistics for both of

theses essays are based on research done by Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto, entitled, The State of Working America, 1004/1005 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

^[iii] Janny Scott, “Cities Shed Middle Class, And Are Richer and Poorer for It, The New York Times, Sunday July 23, 2006, Page 1, Section 4, “The Week in Review.”

^[iv] Hendricks, 321.

^[v] Hendricks, 307.

^[vi] Wikipedia.com