

## “THE GREATEST GENERATION”

Matthew 11:16-19 November 11, 2018

“(They) came of age in the Great Depression, when economic despair hovered over the land like a plague... They answered the call to help save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled... They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest.” So wrote NBC anchor Tom Brokaw in his bestseller, *The Greatest Generation*. He was describing the American men and women who helped win the Second World War.

A series of anniversaries like the seventy-seventh anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and yesterday’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War 1, plus popular movies, like *Saving Private Ryan*, have focused renewed attention to the struggles and sacrifices of “The Builders.” Tom Brokaw calls them “The Builders” because they not only won the war, but also built a strong economy, and helped rebuild Western Europe and Japan. They were a truly great generation. America is grateful for all who sacrificed to give us the prosperous, free country we enjoy today.

On this Veterans’ Day Sunday, let us think a bit on what might make for greatness in *any* generation. For our nation continues to face challenges today. The threats may not be as clear as World War Two. But there remain nagging uncertainties about terrorism. Plus the challenges of poverty, homelessness, violence and environmental degradation that have plagued us for decades. In 1936, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.” That was true just before the Second World War. It is equally true today. In each generation American has a “rendezvous with destiny.” We might do well to explore what it might take to make us great today.

It seems to me, firstly, that greatness is connected to vision. Let’s consider another “Great Generation,” the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Those men—John and Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Thomas Jefferson among them—*envisioned* a new creation among the world’s nations, where all men were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.

Admittedly, the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were originally extended only to white, male, property owners. Women and people of color were excluded. It took decades to start to right those wrongs. Still, the

signers of the Declaration of Independence had big dreams for America. Their vision for America helped make it great.

What we dream for this country in 2019 is also important. “Where there is no dream, the people perish,” Proverbs warns (29:18, KJV) Will we keep dreaming “Patriot Dreams” (as in “O beautiful for Patriot dream that sees beyond the years”) for America? One dream we need to dream-and work for—is housing for all.

Katherine Lee Bates, author of “America the Beautiful” wrote, “Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears,” after her 1904 tour of America’s cities. I wonder what Bates would say if she were to visit American’s cities today. Few of our present cities are either “alabaster” or “gleaming.” Most, including small cities, are “dimmed” by the tears and fears of homeless men and women. After volunteering at the COMEA shelter in Cheyenne, I remember faces that we served meals to and how appreciative they were with their thanks as we gave from our plenty to those in need.

Can we *envision* an America where everyone has adequate food, clothing, and shelter? Can we commit ourselves to working on that problem until it starts to get solved? As Franklin D. Roosevelt put it, “The test of our progress is not whether we add on to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

Another dream we need to dream in 2018 is the dream of a clean environment. Katharine Lee Bates wrote of “spacious skies’ and “amber waves of grain...purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain.” That was about 100 years ago. Our skies don’t seem quite as “spacious” anymore, when three out of ten Americans breath polluted air, and our plains aren’t quite as “fruited” anymore, as farmland is lost at a rate of two million acres a year.

God entrusted us with the gift of this magnificent country, “from sea to shining sea.” I know sometimes we act like we’ve forgotten how precious it is. Can we dream of, and work for, a renewed reverence for our environment? It seems to me greatness is tied to vision. Can we envision an American where human needs are met, while the environment is respected?

I think another aspect of greatness is a sense of accountability. Many members of that “greatest generation” were really good about this. Over and over in Brokaw’s book he tells the story of men and women rising up to take

responsibility: on the battlefield, on the home front, in business, in their communities, and in raising their children.

Dwight Eisenhower might be a good illustration of accountability in this generation. You perhaps remember the statement Ike made just before D-Day, when the success of the Normandy landings was very much in doubt. As Supreme Allied Commander he wrote, for publication, should the attack fail, “The troops, the Army and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty possibly could. If any blame or fault is attached to this attempt, it is mine alone.” What a great statement—greatness tied to a sense of personal accountability! Couldn’t we use more accountability like Ike’s in America today?

We are all accountable to each other. One commentator has suggested that we don’t just need a Declaration of Independence but also a Declaration of Dependence: the acknowledgement of how much we depend on each other. We depend on each other to deal honestly and act responsibly for our nation’s well-being. We depend on each other to tell the truth, even if, sometimes, the truth hurts. A sense of accountability could well be another aspect of greatness, and another characteristic we need to foster in the United States.

Another critical characteristic of national greatness is the acknowledgement that we depend not only on each other, but also, and ultimately, on God. We do this in our country by putting “God has favored our undertakings” in Latin and “In God we trust” in English on our currency and coins. Another acknowledgment of our dependence on God has been in our Pledge of Allegiance, where we declare ourselves to be “one nation *under God*.”

Our dependence on God has been acknowledged since the early years of our country. Thomas Jefferson was probably the least conventionally religious president that America has ever had. It was Jefferson who rewrote the New Testament. He removed all miracles and all references to the supernatural from it, including Jesus’ resurrection.

Even Jefferson strongly acknowledged America’s dependence on God. One Sunday morning, during Jefferson’s presidency, a friend stopped Jefferson when the president, carrying his prayer book, was on his way to church services. He was going, by the way, to worship on Capital Hill. I was surprised to learn that regular Sunday services were held in the Capitol, the Treasury Building, the War Department building, and Supreme Court for many years. In fact, the first woman

every officially to speak in the Capitol was a woman preacher who delivered a Sunday sermon there.

Jefferson was on his way to worship at the Capitol when a friend stopped him. “Why are you going to worship?” his friend asked. “You don’t believe all the things the preacher says.” Jefferson responded, “No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can it be.” He went on to explain that, as Chief Executive, he was obligated to give religion its proper place.

From our founding, America has been “one nation under God.” We will continue to be “under God,” whether the Pledge of Allegiance ends up saying so or not. I hope it still will. Nevertheless, our nation, and all nations, rely on God’s providence and stand under God’s judgment. Abraham Lincoln’s warning, written in 1863, is still pertinent today. Lincoln wrote, in the midst of the Civil War:

*We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation ever has grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand that preserves us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; as we have vainly imagined... that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success we have become to self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace; too proud to pray to the God who made us.*

May that not be so for us. Rather, may we acknowledge, now and always, our dependence on God.

Tom Brokaw ran into a young fireman at Ground Zero in New York City after September 11. The fireman was part of the rescue efforts after the collapse of the Twin Towers. In a clear reference to Brokaw’s book, the young fireman said something like, “Just watch us now, Mr. Brokaw, and see if this generation has what it takes for greatness.” To me, greatness includes concern for the least among us, respect for the land God has entrusted to us, accountability to each other, and acknowledgement of our dependence on God. In the scripture lesson for this morning that Mary read, Jesus asks, “...to what will I compare this generation?” We might all compare ourselves to those standards and see if, in our time, as Jesus puts it, “...wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matthew 11:16a, 19b NRSV).