

Freedom and Justice for All

Friday night over one thousand people gathered for the 2006 Jackson High School Graduation ceremonies. It is kind of mind boggling when you think about it. One hundred seventy some hearts beating seated on this the fields of this beautiful stadium with level playing surface and bright, colorful markings. It is incredible to think about the talent, skills, abilities and futures represented in the graduates. It leads you to think about other human lives and what they have brought about in our world—supersonic planes, heart transplants, super-highways, sky hugging buildings. It is even more incredible when you realize that some millions or billions of years ago there was nothing. What human being could ever even have imagined all this. What human could have built it all from scratch. But then God had a dream. God spoke chaos into existence. Thousands, millions of years later all of this that we see and hear—from nothing but a dream, and the dream is not yet fully realized.

Some two hundred and thirty years ago, a group of very different men had a dream of freedom and equality. They expressed their dream in words and put them down on paper. “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.” A few years later, Cornwallis surrendered to American forces led by General George Washington at Yorktown. The dream was being realized. But it still had not come true.

A delegation with representation from all the colonies was put together to form a constitution. The document that they produced read, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” “In order to form a more perfect union . . . -- if the dream was to come true, the rules of the road needed to be better rules, that allowed those who were taxed to be represented, and power to be shared. The union was still not perfect in other ways as well. The North wanted slavery abolished. The South would never have come on board under those conditions. Belief in equality was expressed, but for property holding men only. Slaves were property and women had no vote. The dream was coming along, but it was not realized.

In 1860 Civil war divided the country. It was a huge price was paid for that omission of freedom for Blacks. But even when the war was done the dream was still not complete. Blacks could not vote in any meaningful way. Free from being owned, they became slaves to an economy in which they could only work for slave wages. Education was not theirs, but lynchings were common. The Ku Klux Klan enforced white superiority by terror. In the 1950's Blacks were relegated to the back of the bus. Martin Luther King spoke of the dream that still slept unfulfilled. “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . I have a dream that one day every

valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." Since then we have come a long way, but the dream is still not realized.

One of my favorite patriotic hymns was written in 1893 by Katherine Lee Bates, Professor of English at Wellesley College. She was taking a trip west and had just attended the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. There she saw exhibits of beautiful white skyscraping buildings, gleaming in the sun. A few weeks later, she stood upon the top of Pikes Peak in Colorado. There she scribbled down the words and dreamed the dream of a brave new world.

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!

Her dream reminds me of the dream John had when he was in prison on the Isle of Patmos.

Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth, [and] I heard a great voice from the throne crying: "See! The home of God is with men, and he will live among them. They shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and will wipe away every tear from their eyes. . . ." Nothing that has cursed mankind shall exist any longer.

I've been in Chicago many times and remember the first time I drove past a statue left over from that exhibition. It is more than 150 feet high and completely covered in gold leaf. It was like taking a step back in time. I stopped the car and got out and went over to look more closely at it. When I am in the city, I enjoy riding up to the top floor of the John Hancock Building. It is a beautiful clean structure, the outside covered with glass. It is an impressive building and an impressive experience. When you look at it and go up in it you can begin to believe that Katherine Lee Bates's dream has come true. The Alabaster city does gleam. But then you look down and west from the observation deck and you see Cabrini Green housing project filled with violence and poverty and despair. The dream is still not finished.

The words "under God" were not added to the Pledge of Allegiance until the 1950's. At that time we were in the middle of a Cold War and we wanted to it to be clear that unlike an atheistic Soviet Union, we believed in God. "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands. One nation, under God, Indivisible with liberty and justice for all." Liberty and justice for all. Amos had a dream of justice for all. God had a dream and put it on the prophet's lips. ". . . let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." God has a dream for our world, our nation.

One of the most famous poems in American History was written by Emma Lazarus. It is engraved on a tablet within the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty stands.

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

It reminds me of the way that Paul described the Christian church in Corinth.

"Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong,"

—Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. A dream for this country. God's dream for the church.

The news Friday reported on services held in Columbus to honor police officers who had died in the line of duty. The speaker spoke of how great their sacrifice was. "All give some," he said. "Some give all." What do we do to honor and remember those who gave all? How do we honor those who, still living, lost parts of their bodies? We visit the cemeteries and decorate the graves. We hold parades and bow our heads in prayer. But we owe them more than that. And those who today are still putting their lives on the line, we owe them more. We owe them proper equipment to save their lives—armor for their vehicles and vests for their bodies. We owe them respect when they come home. What a travesty that those who came home from Vietnam were greeted with booing and hissing and stuff thrown. What a travesty that they came home to jobs no longer there and employers not interested in hiring. We owe them adequate medical care, especially those who came back with less of their bodies they left home with, and those shell shocked and burdened with nightmares and flashbacks. And we owe them adequate life insurance. The rate was raised from \$6,000 to \$12,000 during this most recent conflict. You'd think a human life was worth more than that, especially one lost in service to country.

But as much as that, we owe it to them and to the world and to God and to ourselves to keep working to realize the dream of true justice and liberty. Saddam Hussein tortured people. They deserve a country that resolves never to stoop so low. The Soviet Union censored out all the negative things from its history books. They deserve to have balanced history of our country, truthful and honest about the incredible courage and intelligence and far sightedness of our leaders but unafraid to be honest about the mistakes and weaknesses and sins of its leaders.

They deserve a place Republicans and Democrats work together to solve the problems that we have, where people who are pro-life and pro-choice can work together to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and work together to change education and society and culture in such a way that the numbers go down.

When the first machines to record and play back television shows came out, I never believed I would be able to afford one. I never thought I would have a computer. Steve Jobs—Bill Gates. What incredible stories of dreams coming more than true and benifitting millions of people. And hospice and emergency medical service for Southern Ohio. America is a place where dreams come true. Dreams are realized every day. Children are taught, diseases are healed.

Much of what we owe to those who gave all is beyond what any one person can do. We don't control the military budgets or decide what equipment soldiers can have. We can't decide what wars to start and what wars to stay out of. But we do control how we treat others and how we use our time. We can treat neighbors as friends and not enemies. We can forgive. We can seek to resolve differences and live together even when we cannot agree. I asked a friend what she would say if she were preaching a

sermon that dealt with Memorial Day. She said, "I would tell people to do something good for someone else every day."

It is not just for the safety of this land that men and women have died. It is so that in this land and eventually in all the world, people will be treated equally, and freedom and justice will truly be for all. They died so that our country will always be in the process of being made more perfect. They died to make this country a land that welcomes others and builds cities free from tears. Millions of years ago—nothing. God spoke. God dreamed. God created—called it very good. Incredible what is here today. It is not in sleeping that the dream comes true, but when, fully awake we work together to make them come true.