

One key goal of the Christian way is to make peace, to make changes, which is the meaning of “repent.” A lasting peace requires changes to be made. Making changes, in our selves, or in society with others, requires *humility*, the attitude that we do not have all the answers, the attitude that we can always learn from others. I think this is a conclusion we can get from this morning's gospel reading. In our reading, Jesus sent his twelve disciples out two by two. That alone is a sign that we need the help and support of others; no one can be a solitary leader or teacher effectively, since we all have shortcomings or blindspots. It is the humble mind and heart that receives help, that learns to cooperate, to collaborate, that readily acknowledges weaknesses or vulnerabilities. Jesus himself could not do many healings in his hometown. Jesus was not “zapping” people with a healing lightning bolt. He needed the participation and belief (*trust*) of recipients; he also needed power from God, so that he himself was always praying, a sign of humility and vulnerability. (He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself, and came in human form, in the form of a servant, Philippians 2).

As Jesus sent the disciples out, two by two, what else did Jesus prescribe? As Mark recalls it, Jesus says, “take nothing for your journey!... no bread, no bag, no money.” Again, this can only lead to humility. The vulnerability of this kind of journey, without bringing one's own supplies, requires a dependence upon others, a dependence on the hospitality of others, a dependence upon the kindness and generosity of others. Ultimately, we could say that it requires a dependence upon God (Spirit) to provide for our needs; it requires a posture of prayer.

We must be clear: When Jesus said that many who were full of unbelief (*mistrust*) could not be healed, this does not imply that all who are not healed have a lack of belief (*trust*) in him. There can be many other reasons for sickness, of course. I'm trying to make the point that humility and receptiveness can be a “key factor” to healing.

This also doesn't mean that all humble people of prayer will have perfect health, nor will they live forever(!), but humility and prayer are postures of receptivity that *can surely help* along the way!

Can we make any connections to our national holiday? I think so! As a nation with the intransigent polarities and infighting of red and blue states, right and left, we surely need healing. We are a great nation, but to think that we are above the fray and decay in the world, is arrogance. I love that middle song we just sang! "Other lands have sunlight and clover and skies as blue as mine!" And "Other hearts are beating with hopes and dreams like mine!" We love our country; but any form of arrogance or superiority only isolates us. We know that a tendency toward isolation or protectionism is growing here and out there in other countries. Isolationism is dangerous, creating a lack of knowledge, a lack of relationship, and ultimately a growing fear of others. Isolation is not a realistic nor helpful posture to take in our "small world." Jesus emphasizes hospitality at the personal level; He tells his disciples to enter into homes, bringing nothing, and to receive their hospitality. Yet his lessons can also hold true with international relations. Hospitality is attending to the needs of the other and learning from the other, which cannot coexist with fear of the other, barking at the other, bombing the other, in defensive fear.

I love to comment on the closing song we will sing today. What did the poet mean "America, America, God shed his grace on thee?" I think it is a mistake to think it is a past-tense statement that God showered our beginnings with nothing but grace. Rather, I believe that like all the other verbs in the third lines, it is a request or prayer that God "please shed grace on us!" America, America May God shed his grace on thee, and then may God crown thy good with brotherhood! Humor me for a moment; I was a language teacher. Think of these verbs as pleas, or "command-form subjunctives!" Think of each line as "*May God please...do x, y, and z.*" Look at the other third lines of each stanza: "(May) God mend thine every flaw!"

and “May God thy gold refine!” Then that last line: “(May God) Crown thy good with brotherhood!” We are so far from true “brotherhood” in our divided country! It is all a plea, a request, polite “command form” verbs. Poet Katherine Lee Bates, in 1895, is acknowledging that as a country we will always need refining, always have flaws, always have a ways to go before reaching true brotherhood. She was known to be a proponent, and activist writer, for social reform.

I’m reminded of Prof. Bill McKibben’s research, that I’ve mentioned before, that for every dollar of assets in the average white household, the average black household has assets of about 7 cents, less than one tenth of white households. Hmmm, “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal!” So if black people are equal, not inherently lazy or less intelligent, then there are things in the system (generational after-effects of slavery we could say) that are still keeping people down. There is something in the system that widens the wealth gap, the housing gap, the educational gap, and the health care gap. Yes, God, please *mend* our every flaw. Please *refine* our gold. Please *shed grace* on America.

Whether it’s taking land from the Native Americans, or saying the Irish “need not apply,” or bringing blacks on slave ships, or keeping them at slave wages even when free, or women making only 75% of men’s wages in the workforce, or LGBTQ folks being asked to stay in the closet... all kinds of oppression have existed and still exist in our country. We can love our country while also being humble enough to acknowledge our flaws.

Besides Katherine Lee Bates’ pleas for God to mend and refine us, another song about America, written several decades ago by a friend of mine, still holds true. It calls us to increase freedom and opportunity for all, to bring healing to all, to be humble servants one to another in this land that we love. This song still rings true!

I SEE AMERICA, c. 1975 by Ken Medema

1. *I have seen the white sand beaches near the town where I was born; I have seen the springtime forest fresh and green. I have walked along the highways, by the fields of standing corn; I have breathed the mountain air so fresh and clean... And I've been in other places where it's hard to breathe the air, and the high-rise holocaust blocks the morning sun. And children play in the dirty streets and no one seems to care. America's children, look what we have done.*

Chorus: I see America with the eyes of love, and long for all her people to be free. And if you see, put your hand to the job; there is work that must be done, till freedom's song is sung, til freedom's bell is rung, from sea to shining sea.

2. *I have seen the dauntless pilgrims who came from foreign shores, and braved the raging peril of the sea. I have seen them suffer hardship and risk their lives in war, in order that a people may be free. But I've seen how first Americans were driven from their land, and I've seen the slave ships come from far away; and tyranny is still alive there is hate on every hand. Yes, we must work to end oppression's day. **Chorus***

3. *I have seen the untold millions whose birthplace freedom made, who nourished by her dream grew strong and tall. I have seen them teach their children so the dream would never fade. I have seen them stand to answer freedom's call. But I've seen how greed and carelessness can wipe the dream away, to create a living nightmare in its stead. So rise up children, dream again, for its time for us to say, "Though some may scoff, the dreamers are not dead!" **Chorus***