

**“My Country Tis of Thee...”**  
**May 25, 2008**  
**Geneseo United Methodist Church**  
**Pastor Craig Ferguson**

We are a proud country, and we have a lot to be proud of. The United States of America is truly the land of the free and the brave; even more than that, it is the land I love.

I must say that as a Christian, I believe that being an American is not only a privilege, but also my birthright. I mean, after all, every American is a Christian right? ... Ok, well maybe not any more these days, but it used to be that way, right?

I have to confess that I have done a lot of soul searching with this sermon. I had determined not to preach anything political. That was for several reasons. First of all, I love you all, and I would hate to say something that may offend anyone. But then I realized I had already offended most of you anyway. Plus I remembered that Jesus seemed to enjoy offending people, and making them uncomfortable with what they believed. On top of that, I recalled that every single one of the Old Testament prophets was detested because they actually told the people what God said. So I figured I might as well give it a try.

We all had our American History classes in school, and we heard how the pilgrims left their native countries to flee to America. There were the Puritans who sought religious freedom, those who left because of the great potato famine in Ireland. (I just found that one out recently) There were those who made their way to America because they heard of the great wealth that could be found. There were preachers like John Wesley who ventured to the shores of Georgia because they imagined the possibilities of sharing the gospel with Native Americans.

If you look at some of our existing communities, we find evidence that every foreign nationality has made a home in America. There are people of all skin color, white, black, yellow, brown, red. Some came seeking refuge, safety, food, health, shelter, religion, or even prosperity. I believe what everyone has found is a melting pot of cultures, a struggle for survival, diversity, enlightenment, prosperity, hope, transformation, pride, and new identity as Americans that recolor's the pasts of each of our families.

In fact as I look at the color of our skin, and personally know many of your family lineages, I am confident to say that none of our families were here when Columbus made his famous voyage.

Members of my mother's family have done some extensive research. I have been told that one of my great ancestors on the side of my mothers, mother actually came over with the Nina, the Santa Maria, and the Pinta.

Just a quick reminder, at that point America was not yet a nation. There were a few years of unjust rule, or domination by a government called England. Then there was a little thing called the Boston Tea party, (I have never tried putting salt in my Tea, but I might have to try that some time,) and a Revolutionary War. Can we all say Halleluiah for how God worked in that time to bring us our freedom today.

Now I am sure some of your families have been in America for a long time too, but I also know that some of your great-great grandfathers came over not all that long ago from Ireland or Germany. Some of you, or your parents or grandparents actually remember speaking a different language in your home, or your church when you were growing up. We still have different recipes in the family cookbooks, we have different traditions, and we celebrate the diversity of our heritage.

I know some of you have even gone back to the old country to see the homeland. I hope someday to see the countries of my Danish and Scott heritage. In fact, I would love to regain some of my culture and be able to wear a kilt with my family tartan, and play Amazing grace on the Bag Pipes. I bet that is something you would all like to do right? Ok, well then you would at least laugh at your pastor in a kilt right?

We all have a diverse background in our America nationality. We are all ourselves aliens, and immigrants in a land that was not our own. However, despite our diversity each of us today are blessed to call this great nation home.

I thought it being Memorial Day that this might be a wonderful opportunity for us to read a few foundational documents that define who we are as a nation. You might be familiar with this one.

*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.*

*That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience bath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses*

*and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.*

There is a lot of wisdom in that historic document. Can anyone tell me what that is? That is right; it is the Preamble to the declaration of Independence, the words that defined us as a new nation, and gave birth to the U.S.A. at that time, a total of 13 states. These words set the stage for the government we now love, and these words set the groundwork by which it must abide to continue to serve the people who live within its care. These words declare the sacred worth of all humanity, and proclaim America's allegiance to uphold that humanity. As stated by the constitution, the government is to serve the people.

*We ask governments to provide for the national defense, prevent crime, catch and punish criminals and build courthouses, jails, roads and airports. We ask them to help businesses grow, protect workers and needy children and protect all of us from hazardous wastes and deadly poisons, while also educating our children, preventing epidemics and defending our constitutional rights to free speech, association and worship. (Tennessee Sen. Roy Herron as quoted by the United Methodist News Source)*

This is our America. It does just that. I don't think any of us could argue that we are probably the wealthiest and most blessed nation in the world. Sure there have been years of difficulty like the depression, but for the most part, we cannot complain with what we have.

In fact, only a few short years after our Declaration of Independence, the rest of the world had already come to recognize us as a nation of liberty, of freedom, of hope, and of prosperity. God had blessed us, and we had grown to include many more states. Iowa became a state in 1848, and at that time I found out that many southern members of congress did want Iowa to become a state of the Union. Hawaii, the last state to join the U.S.A. did not join until... Does anyone remember what year? ... 1959. We are a very young Nation, and we are still growing, changing, still struggling to define our self, to define government, to define our understanding of humanity.

Look at us, we are America, land of the free, the proud, the brave. We are getting pretty good at being a nation, but we do have a bit of a rocky past. Who is to say, but we might still have some growing up to do yet.

A good example was the greatest war America has participated in. The war that 3 million of our ancestors fought in, and over 600,000 of them died in. It was the war that took place about the time Geneseo was becoming a community, and just before the Church was established. The Civil war left no family unwounded. It left mothers

without husbands, children without fathers, and parents without children. As painful as it was to every family in America at that time, it helped define who we are as a nation that really believes that each person is “*created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*”

After that war the Preamble actually came to include people of color under the protection of our constitution. However, as sad as it is, it took until the civil rights movement of the 1960’s to bring them any measure of equality, and still today African Americans and other ethnic Americans wrestle with the inequality of assumed status.

Let me say, not all that long ago, I would have argued that racism is not present in America today. But as much as I wish that was true, it is not. I could share example after example, but instead I will allow you to wrestle with your own experiences.

As a nation, we continue to grow up.

In World War I or II, the Korean, and Vietnam War, Desert Storm, and even the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have identified ourselves as international pursuers of justice and purveyors of freedom. Whether or not we were successful, we have a lot to be proud of. A lot of our family members, children, parents, and siblings have served in these wars to defend the very freedom that we have, and the freedom of all humanity. Today we must stop the business of our lives and take time to thank those who have served in the armed forces to defend the nation, the freedom, the life that we love. Thank you to those who have served this country, and who have sacrificed to keep America free.

America is a great country that I am proud to be a part of, and so far I have shared with you one of the documents that define us as Americans, the Preamble to the constitution. Let’s see if you can tell me where this famous piece of literature comes from, it is just a little harder.

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "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-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

What is that from? (The New Colossus, the poem inscribed in the statue of Liberty) We are seen as the home for all the unwanted in the world, the tired, the poor, the wretched refuse, the exiles, and from these homeless, we have become a nation, a great nation, a nation that stands for freedom and liberty for all.

For the most part, up to this point, we have followed scripture and been faithful to the biblical commands to love our neighbors and accept the aliens and immigrants among us. Scriptures like, **Ezekiel 47:22-23** which says, "...the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. <sup>23</sup> In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord GOD." Or **Exodus 22:21-22** "<sup>21</sup> You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Let me ask, are we such a great nation because all of our ancestors were the greatest people in world history? I don't think so, most of our ancestors came here with nothing.

Are we such a great nation because we have the best armed forces? Maybe, we have been able to defend our freedom against some of the greatest nations in history. But I do not think that is what makes us great.

Are we such a great nation because so many came here for religious reasons? I doubt that, most religions are present in every other nation.

Are we such a great nation because of our wealth? Some would say so, but in all honesty, money can be used for good or for evil, and Americans do not always make the best of choices.

Are we such a great nation because of our constitution? I think that is a great start. Our constitution set the stage for human freedom worldwide. You can't go wrong with that. But what do you think? What is it that makes America such a great nation? ...

I would like to suggest today that America is such a great nation because we began as a Christian nation and accepted all the refuse, the marginalized, the tired and the poor of the world. Our ancestors who immigrated to America made America what it is, and the fact that their children, us, are now are the predominant citizens, makes America great.

But we continue to grow up. We continue to learn what it means to love and accept people of different color, culture, and social status. We continue to grow as we

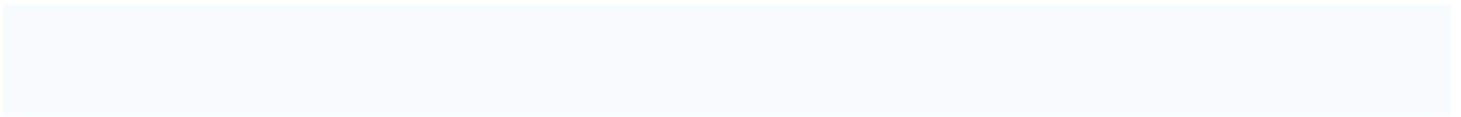
stand up for justice, righteousness, and freedom worldwide. We continue to grow as individuals immigrate and claim America as their nation.

Our Biblical command (one of many) is found in **Leviticus 19:34-37** “<sup>34</sup> The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

As your pastor, I am not going to tell you what to do with this sermon, and I hope you will not stone me after the service, like happened to so many Old Testament prophets.

But I am going to ask that we give the word of God just as much weight in our lives as the culture seems to already possess over us. I am going to ask that instead of just reacting to world and national events the way we have been pre-formed by the culture, that we assess with integrity who we are in history, who God has called us to be in the present, and what God has called America to be in the future. And whatever you do, don't make those assumptions without first looking at what scripture says, and believing that all of humanity is created in the image of God.

I don't know about you, but I am proud to be an American, to live in the land of freedom, liberty, and justice for all of God's children. Amen.



“Where immigration is permitted, it is typically selective. Ethnic selection, such as the [White Australia policy](#), has generally disappeared, but priority is usually given to the educated, skilled, and wealthy. Less privileged individuals, including the mass of poor people in low-income countries, cannot avail of these immigration opportunities. This inequality has also been criticized as conflicting with the principle of [equal opportunities](#), which apply (at least in theory) within democratic nation-states. The fact that the door is closed for the unskilled, while at the same time many developed countries have a huge demand for unskilled labor, is a major factor in [illegal immigration](#). The contradictory nature of this policy - which specifically disadvantages the unskilled immigrants while exploiting their labor - has also been criticized on ethical grounds.” (Wikipedia)

In America, politics selects and controls the governments that save lives-or don't. In America, politics and government often are forces for good. If sometimes they do not do their job as well as they should, then we should participate in the process and make them better.

Plato wrote: "He who refuses to rule is liable to be ruled by one who is worse than himself."

And so it is for faithful Christians today. If people of faith refuse to participate in politics, then others will make the crucial decisions. In a democracy, the people get the government they choose-and work for. You could say we get the government we deserve.

Government can be awful and it can be good; often it is both. Our duty, as citizens and as Christians, is to make it better. The question, then, is not: How can a Christian be in politics? The question is: How can a Christian not be in politics? *UMNS# 222-Commentary: How can a Christian be in politics?* **By Tennessee Sen. Roy Herron\***