

## *Reflections on America*

In the days around the fourth of July, our thoughts are drawn to our celebration of the founding of our nation. It's also an appropriate time to reflect on our relationship as Christian citizens with our country. A guiding light that scripture gives us includes the principle of loving our neighbor as ourselves. While the story that Jesus told about the good Samaritan makes it glaringly obvious that people of other nations are our neighbors, care about our neighbor certainly includes our fellow citizens. Loving our neighbor is a goal to reach for, a vision to turn into reality, a standard raised that draws us toward right behavior.

Our Declaration of Independence raises a vision that is certainly a compatible expression of the second greatest commandment. The phrase, "that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" wasn't a statement of reality in 1776 so much as it was a vision of where we sought to be. At that time, "all men" were in reality only white, property owning males. Over time, all white males were allowed to vote. It took almost one hundred years for the whites only restriction to be removed theoretically, and almost two hundred years for it to become a reality for great numbers of citizens of color. And it wasn't until the early twentieth century that the vision of "all" included the feminine gender of humankind. If you have ever been poor, undereducated, or a member of any number of minority groups, you know that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is a vision that is still not 100% realized. Just as we Presbyterians try to be reformed and always reforming, it is appropriate that as citizens we strive to always work toward more complete implementation of the vision of equality expressed through the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But what about the greatest commandment of all, that we shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? How does that affect our lives as citizens of this nation? In 1976, I fell in love, deeply, passionately in love. Not with Cathy...that was two years later. I went to Alaska, driven by sheer financial desperation, but while I was there I had an epiphany, a revelation, if you will. Few of us ever get to spend any time in a place that is truly pristine, a place that has not experienced what we in human pride call "development." Up on the North Slope, above the Arctic Circle, between the Brooks Mountains to the south and Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Ocean to the north, I experienced God's creation as it first began to be touched by human "development." I'd seen millions of stars on moonless nights out in the open spaces of Texas, but in the air of the Arctic that is out of the way of human industry, the air was so clear that we could see billions of stars! The water flowing in the Sagavanirktok River was crystal clear. Wildlife wandered by with little fear of the two legged beasts that had invaded the area recently. And the air smelled sweet and clean. It was beyond remarkable, it was amazing! Try to imagine being stunned by beauty continually, day after day. And when I returned to Texas every few months to see family and friends, I was appalled by the smell, the noise, the clutter, and the artificial landscape.

For the first time, I fully believed and understood what the psalmist meant in Psalm 24, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; <sup>2</sup> for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers". (Psalm 24:1-2 NRS) The earth is not ours. We are tenants and caretakers. We have the responsibility of stewardship. We are to use and enjoy, but we must live gently on this blue marble that hangs in space. This is the only home we have and it doesn't belong to us. One way that we can love God is to use all our heart, mind, soul, and strength in caring for God's property.

I took pictures, amateurish and inadequate, but no picture can do justice to the beauty, the quiet, the sweet smell, and the unblemished balance. But all I have to share are imprecise words and tiny images. I hope that they give you some small glimmer of the majesty and perfection of God's handiwork.

In a few moments we will sing America the Beautiful. We so often sing it as a mandate from God, sing it with pride, and with a sense of accomplishment. I invite you to pay close attention to the words. This hymn is

a prayer. It holds a vision for us to seek in pilgrimage. Sing it with humility, for we have not arrived – we are still on the journey. Sing it with hope, gratitude, and yearning. Amen.