

Three Little Words

A sermon by Glenn D. Johnson, Sr.

Wedgewood Baptist Church

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Three little words. We see them everywhere. Obvious especially since September 11, written on every type of surface, worn on lapel pins and t-shirts, scribbled on storefronts, displayed on the rear windows of huge pick-ups, even tattooed on body parts I can't mention here. Yes, "God Bless America" confronts us from every angle. You may recall that we included the singing of "God Bless America" in our worship service on September 16th.

The phrase, or prayer, "God bless America" is sincere....it's heartfelt, an echo of values older than our country. We long for God's blessing on anything that is ours.....children, ball teams, business ventures, churches, nation.... because we want desperately to believe that God is on our side. We want to think that God has blessed, is now blessing, and will continue to bless our country. Partly, that stems from a desire to be proven correct. Our thinking goes, "if God blesses us, we must be righteous, or at least, right." But even without that thought, we consider our prosperity, our magnificent institutions, our wealth, our freedoms, our incredible military power....and we feel blessed. God bless America.

Now perhaps God has blessed America, but I think that there is an equal possibility of a reaping of seed that has been sown, an ongoing harvest of crops that were planted by our forefathers' acting wisely and well. I suspect that what some call God's blessing of America might really be a result of Americans' actions throughout our nation's history. And that's what I invite you to explore with me this morning.

I am indebted to Dr. Claire Gaudiani, Senior Research Fellow at Yale Law School, for much of the material I shall share with you. She spoke in Charlotte last month on the subject of "Philanthropy and the Sacred Texts." She has written: "To most of us, July Fourth seems like the most American of holidays, with its red, white and blue bunting, its flags and fireworks and patriotic speeches. Actually **Thanksgiving Day** is the completely American holiday. Every country in the world celebrates its founding, but America has a national holiday to celebrate its *soul*. Thanksgiving Day, as every fourth grader who has worn a feathered headband or a pilgrim's hat and collar knows, commemorates generosity. **Generosity** – more American than pumpkin pie. It defines the American spirit."

All of mankind has inherited an incredibly diffuse, yet powerfully uniform, call to generosity. The wisdom tradition is held in ancient texts as disparate as the Bible, the Qu'ran, the I Ching, and the words of Confucius, the Buddha, Maimonides and many others. This is humanity's endowment from its past, but we Americans have adapted that endowment uniquely into our culture. An understanding and acceptance of the fundamental character of charity is expressed

and given importance in our Declaration of Independence, Federalist Papers and Emancipation Proclamation.

We Americans are still a wonderfully charitable people. We know, for example, that the first impulse of Americans that followed the tragedies of September 11th, after grief, was generosity. Within three days, a gas pipeline company, First Union National Bank and Bill Gates had initiated the September 11th Fund. Within four weeks, that fund alone had received more than \$300,000,000, and the total amount given to honor and help the relief effort has now exceeded one point one billion dollars. Handfuls of pennies from children and checks of all sizes came from Americans throughout the land. People in a poor neighborhood of New Jersey collected used-but-clean socks door to door, to give to the workers who were digging in that wet refuse in lower Manhattan. Our overwhelming response was: we want to share, to give, to help.

Let's take a look at the call to charity's roots. All of the sacred texts of humanity have a strong injunction to practice philanthropy. We have in our tradition the story of the Good Samaritan, and we honor its multiple layers of meaning. But we tend not to remember that Jesus was discussing with a lawyer the two greatest laws (what are they? "Thou shalt...." yes, of course, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and being, and love your neighbor as yourself"), but then the lawyer asked the foundational question, "who is my neighbor?" And Jesus told that well-known story.

Frederick Grant, New Testament scholar at Union Theological Seminary in New York, has written that charity, properly understood, does not equate to almsgiving. That concept is post-Reformation and is not biblical. Charity is fraught with derivations from *caritas*, a Latin word that contains the richest meanings of self-denial and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. He advises that the best rendering of 1st Corinthians 13: 13 is "In a word, there are three things that last forever: faith, hope and charity; but the greatest of them is charity."

Quickly, let's look at other traditions. The prophet Mohammed enjoined his followers to support and value the Five Pillars of Islam.....the first is "Allah Akbar" – Praise God, who is great and always to be revered. And the second pillar of the Islamic faith is to practice charity to all those who have less than you have....no matter how little you have. If a Muslim meets someone who has less than he, he is obligated to share with that person.

The Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of *Ahimsa* is basically a call to act nonviolently out of respect for the sacredness of all living creatures. As it was developed in the Upanishads of the 12th Century, *Ahimsa* incorporates a call to make a charitable response whenever another creature is seen to have a need. One is expected, in this tradition, to care for the other. It is in that spirit that Buddhist monasteries provide, within their walls, both a place of refuge for the poor and downtrodden, and hospitals to care for the suffering.

Confucius taught, in the 6th century before the Common Era, the necessity of sharing one's wealth. Interestingly, there is a Chinese ideogram which has the dual meanings of humanity and benevolence... interrelated ... two meanings, yet one and the same.

There are, of course, strong threads dealing with charity in the Jewish tradition; our Old Testament passage was but one. Hear of another. The greatest Jewish figure, the most amazing intellect, in all of post-biblical Judaism is a man named Maimonides.

He was born in Spain in the 11th Century, but soon after he became Bar Mitzvah, his family was forced to flee from persecution by fundamentalist Muslims. For 12 years, they wandered around the Mediterranean, finally settling in Cairo. Maimonides mastered Aristotelian philosophy, became fluent in Arabic and began at age 23 a major commentary on Jewish texts in Arabic, and later wrote in Hebrew what is still the definitive codification of the Torah (Mishneh Torah). While engaged in all of this intellectual activity, he studied medicine and mastered the healing art so well that he was named chief physician in the court of Saladin, Sultan of Egypt, the leader who turned back the Crusade led by Richard the Lion-Hearted.

Maimonides also wrote a slender treatise on agriculture, and in this little book, he digressed into a discussion of *tzedakah*, or Charity. His organized mind described the 8 stages of Charity. The lowest, 8th stage is when you give as little as you can get away with, as infrequently as possible, reluctantly and with the greatest derision toward the recipient, and you distribute it in a way that brings maximum attention and credit to yourself. But Maimonides acknowledged that even this sort of grudging charity has value, and meets the definition of *tzedakah*.

I won't cite the varying degrees up from there, but knowing the lowest, you might deduce that the highest stage of charity is the complete opposite – giving as much as you can, cheerfully, with no knowledge of the person you are helping and without the recipient's knowing who is giving to him, and doing it in total anonymity. But that is the 2nd best stage of charity. The highest level of charity is to give a loan or to help the needy person to get a job, so that he or she won't ever need to seek charity again. Philanthropy is an interesting word. It comes from *philos* and *anthropos*, word stems meaning "love of...mankind."

The three faiths of Abraham – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – place strong stress on philanthropy, as do Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism..... all the ancient sacred traditions call their followers to give to the needy, to practice charity, to share with their neighbor. So we see that the peoples of the world, through their revered and traditional texts, are called to charity toward their fellowman. But Dr. Gaudiani believes firmly that we Americans have undertaken charity uniquely.

Yes, we Americans are generous. We are endowed by our history with a bent to generosity. A central theme of the American past is sharing.

Remember that our forefathers were by and large poor, simple people. When they married and set out in life, they had no wealth, no great savings, no inheritance to provide for them. What they had was neighbors....people who may not have even known their names when they moved in, but who joined together with materials that were given and labor that was donated in barn raisin's and quiltin' parties and poundin'sall of which were ways for those who had acquired some things to share with those who were in need.

Another example of American generosity...in 1670, at a time when admission to the great universities of England was restricted to the sons of the aristocracy, Yale University mandated in its founding charter the expectation that its student body would always include young men from the bottom of the economic ladder. And men of means provided scholarship funds to insure their inclusion. Scholarships are still a very important means of getting an education in America. No such effort to train the children of the disadvantaged existed in Europe. It hardly exists today. Do you know how many students from the bottom economic quintile of French society attend the Sorbonne (sort of a combination Harvard, Yale and Princeton)? Zero. American opportunity was one thing, but the frequently available generous helping hand was what enabled many capable persons to take advantage of that opportunity. And America has prospered mightily thereby.

You know what a fabulous success the Marshall Plan was. At the conclusion in 1945 of the greatest, more horrific war mankind has ever known, Europe, North Africa, the middle East, Russia, Asia.....many parts of the world were devastated and in ruins. The Axis powers -- Germany, Italy and Japan -- were shattered losers.

Historically, winners of such conflicts imposed punitive conditions and levies, and confiscated the art, surviving resources and remaining wealth of the losers. But America, led by the vision of General George C. Marshall, avoided the traditional "punishment" of the losers. Marshall argued persuasively that America could and should do better, could and should help its neighbors get back on their feet.....allies and vanquished foes alike. And so America poured millions of dollars of materials and capital and know-how into the restoration of the economies and productivity and political structures of those countries which had lost so much. We did not sack and rape and pillage like victors of other ages; we forgave war loans; we offered a helping hand of charity. We treated all, even our erstwhile enemies, as neighbors whom we were called to love.