

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Philippians 1:3-11 "America! America!"

In 1893, a 33-year-old woman, daughter of a Congregational minister, soon to become a professor of English at Wellesley, took a summer job teaching in Colorado. She traveled across the country by train, stopping in Chicago to visit the World's Fair. From Colorado Springs, after climbing to the top of 14000 ft. Pikes Peak, she wrote in her diary "Seeing the view, I felt great joy. All of America seemed displayed there, with a sea-like expanse."

Her name was Katharine Lee Bates, and two years later she published a poem on July 4 in a weekly magazine called *The Congregationalist*. She named the poem *Pikes Peak*. We know it better as *America The Beautiful*, the name it acquired after it was set to Samuel Ward's music in 1910. Many people have thought it would have been a good National Anthem.

Bates lived in what became known as *The Gilded Age*, a name coined by Mark Twain in 1873 to describe the opulence of the new "captains of industry" - Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Mellon, J.P. Morgan and the like. From the time the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, men like this built the modern industrial economy, based on corporations dedicated to exploiting oil, steel, coal, transportation, communication. By 1900 the USA led the world in per capita

income and industrial production. And its industrial leaders became fabulously rich.

They built "summer cottages" - mansions that you can still tour today in Newport, Rhode Island and along Long Island's "Gold Coast." They grew wealthy because they were great organizers and planners, because they built large and efficient factories and introduced automation, and because America was awash in cheap labor. Between 1840 and 1910, over 37 million immigrants arrived from Ireland, Italy, Germany, the UK and Eastern Europe, and they all needed jobs.

The income and wealth gap between owners and workers grew to unprecedented levels. Mark Twain derided the rich for their "gilded" lives, but the poor began to organize themselves (over strenuous opposition) into labor unions; the AFL - the American Federation of Labor - was formed in 1886. J.D. Rockefeller admired the new writings of Charles Darwin, and opined that success in industry was all about "the survival of the fittest" - it was the hey-day of "Social Darwinism."

National wealth was large, but very unevenly distributed. Distressed by what he saw, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie proposed philanthropy as the answer, and he traveled the country preaching "The Gospel

of Wealth" - meaning not that God willed some people to become rich, but that the rich had an religious obligation to help the poor. He gave away most of his wealth in his lifetime, founding libraries, schools, and universities, as well as foundations that still bear his name today. The other bright spot for the poor in the age of the "robber barons" was the emergence of the "Social Gospel" movement, led by Walter Rauschenbusch and others, which aimed to awaken Protestant Christians to the dire social needs of their day.

### 1) *America The Beautiful*

In the midst of all this, Katharine Lee Bates wrote *America The Beautiful*. She was a gifted writer, and had learned from her Congregationalist father not only the need for God's grace in all things, but the rhythms of New Testament letter-writing. She began each of her stanzas with what was good about America, and then prayerfully exhorted God and the nation to fix what was wrong.

Beautiful, spacious, majestic, fruitful though America was, she needed God's grace so that what was good could be "*crowned with brotherhood.*" Rauschenbusch deplored the individualism of American society, in Christian faith as well as in wealth accumulation, and formed a group he named *The Brotherhood of the Kingdom*. He was certain that the Gospel had broad social implications as well as personal ones.

Bates evidently agreed. Her poem continues - America has a wonderful "pilgrim" tradition of exploration, crossing the wilderness, expansion, bringing freedom. But she longs for God to "*Mend every flaw;*" that he would instill "*self-control*" and "*law*" to this land of liberty. A strong tradition of sacrifice, and work for the benefit of others, had marked the Revolutionary period, when

"*heroes... loved their country more than self;*" but that had "gone with the wind," and the Gilded Age needed its gold refined. Success ought to bring "*nobleness,*" and personal gain was not enough - it ought to be gain that honored God and his will.

But like many of her generation, Bates still had great hopes for her nation. An almost "millennial" vision of the future had been bolstered by what she had seen in the Chicago World's Fair - the remarkable *Beaux Arts* architecture of its pavilions designed by men like Frederick Law Olmstead, the fabulous collection of buildings called *The White City*, which gave her inspiration for "*alabaster cities... free of tears.*" "America! America!" she cried; seek God's grace, and make "brotherhood" your aim!

### 2) *The New Gilded Age*

So we still love to sing her poem, our hymn, showing her view of America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find ourselves living in what has been repeatedly described in the past decade as *The New Gilded Age*.

The "captains of industry" have largely been replaced by the "masters of the universe;" people who create wealth for themselves and their corporations by manipulating money itself. Of course we still have old-style industries - oil, for example: Rockefeller's Standard Oil Corporation became Esso which became Exxon which became Exxon-Mobil, and is now the world's largest publicly held corporation, with annual revenues of \$350 billion, and annual profits up to \$40 billion. But New York City hedge funds were estimated to have earned \$20-40 billion a year until recently, and they do that just by redistributing money, not by creating or producing anything!

The gap between the richest and poorest in our country is now said to be the highest in 100 years. The Great Recession we are still struggling out of has left almost 10% of people unemployed, but that number is far larger among the working poor, and among young people (about 50% for those aged 16-24). Couple that with the disillusionment many people feel with government at all levels, and you have the basis for widespread national anger.

What would Katharine Lee Bates pray for today? What should we pray for? Even if you dislike government "redistribution of wealth" programs in principle, I hope we could pray for the survival of programs like Medicaid, disability and unemployment payments, education and re-training. As Carnegie discovered, philanthropy can only go so far when the number of people in need is large; collective action is needed, which is what governments and taxation are for.

I hope we could agree to pray for better government at all levels. Our dismay at the performance of leaders in our towns, our State Legislature, the US Congress, the Federal Government, ought to lead us to prayer as much as anger. I hope we could pray for better oversight of much of our industry, from Wall Street to health insurance to oil rigs.

When our economy booms, we get complacent; we are amazed and nearly paralyzed when something bad happens. Environmentalist Carl Safina, speaking at a conference on the oil leak last week, commented graphically that *"It's as if having poked 30,000 holes into the sea floor of the Gulf of Mexico, and having 5,000 rigs operating, it never occurred to anyone to say, "Oh, what if oil starts coming out of one of those holes..."* We are lamentably short-sighted, concerned about this quarter's profits, our needs, the next election, and rarely beyond that. I suspect

our grandchildren will have some things to say about us!

America! America! We need to wake up to the warning signs: there are many, many good things about our nation and our culture, but we have slipped into a period when many social and governmental issues that we have neglected far too long have become serious problems. We need a little more "self-control," a little more "law," and a little less reliance on Adam Smith's "invisible hand" (by which *he* meant God's Providence, and *we* mean "Market Forces"!) or on "Social Darwinism." We need much more reliance on the grace of God.

With faith in God comes responsibility: not only to "love God," but to "love our neighbor as ourselves." Love in Biblical thought is a very practical thing: a dedication to someone's welfare. As Christians, we have a special responsibility, as part of our nation's "conscience," to pray for God's grace, and to work for other people's welfare - that is, that other people may flourish as we do.

Let us pray that our National Holiday - our "Celebration of Independence" - will remind us that "independence from British tyranny" was not meant to lead to "independence from one another." We still need God's grace, and each other. Pray for growth in what Katharine Lee Bates called "brotherhood" - a dedication to the common good!

Let us pray...