

# “We Hold These Truths...”

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Genesis 1:26-28a; Galatians 5:1, 13a*

The seniors were preparing to graduate from their beloved, Washington Community High School in Illinois. But there was a snag. Three days before graduation the court handed down a temporary injunction – disallowing the inclusion of any “prayer” during this momentous event.

For eighty years they had prayed at graduation! Many were upset, including some seniors. Senior Ryan Brown was scheduled to give a speech during the ceremony. He had a plan. First, as Ryan made his way to the podium, he stopped to bow in silent prayer – the audience stood and applauded. And as he was speaking, he faked a sneeze, whereupon (as planned) many students called out “God Bless You!”

A brief prayer, but a prayer.

We hold these truths...that we are endowed by our Creator, Nature’s God, the Supreme Judge, and protected by Divine Providence! Of course these names of God haven’t been taken from a theology book, nor a church prayer book; instead, these resonate from our foundational American document – The Declaration of Independence!

These appellations were not window dressing to keep the hoi polloi drugged by religion. No! They were sincere declarations of great individuals reflecting the ethos and the peoples understanding of life, its purpose, and its trajectory.

Through the Judeo/Christian tradition, in tandem with ancient Greek and Roman political thinking – our nation was so conceived.

Too often, the Jewish-Christian content of this magnificent event has been ignored or denied. Pivotal to this founding, this document is the recognition that these “certain unalienable rights” are not derived from government, they are not graciously handed down to us from those who govern – but instead, and of necessity, these rights are bestowed upon us only by God, our Creator!

“We Hold These Truths to be self-evident...” Really? By all means! Taken for granted, prior to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – is the Creator, the Supreme Judge!

How much misinformation, historical neglect, and apathy cloud our understanding of who we have been, and who we are.

This morning I just want to remind you of the wealth and power of the vision of this nation from its beginning. I recognize pluralism; I appreciate dialogue with those who are different. But, today we are in dire need to remember, to sustain the ideas, the values of our founding.

We Hold These Truths...

Do we?

To what extent?

To what end?

Our founding documents were never a-religious, nor anti-religious! Sectarianism was out – but the Creator, Nature’s God, the Supreme Judge was not!

Recall the seven-foot cross that stood in the Mojave Desert for 70 years, commemorating American lives lost in World War I? You know the one that had been covered with plywood since the early 2000’s. Some declared its presence was unconstitutional; separation of church and state you know. Recently a five to four ruling came down from the Supreme Court declaring the cross should remain! Wonderful! But how could four justices think otherwise? (I know, but I still had to ask.) Oh, and weeks after the decision the cross was stolen.

Allow me to share another true story about crosses. Please I’m not drawing a parallel, but rather a cautionary note. Professor Paul Froese has written a short history of the Soviet Unions plan to eradicate religion from its people. The title of the book is The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization. The facts of murder, gulags, church destruction and confiscation are horrendous! But listen to this:

One of the most impressive stories of religious resistance to Soviet rule occurred outside the medieval city of Siauliai, Lithuania. Townsfolk placed an array of crosses atop a nearby hill. Over time the number of crosses multiplied, thereby distressing Soviet officials, who promptly had the hill bulldozed. The crosses immediately reappeared and kept reappearing, despite ongoing efforts to remove them and guard the area. The phenomenon reached mythic proportions, and the amazing story of a hill that miraculously sprouted crosses spread throughout Lithuania. In the end, Soviets simply abandoned trying to tear them down. Today, visitors to Siauliai can still visit the “hill of crosses” and marvel at the sight of thousands of crosses erected in direct defiance of forced secularization.

Of course we still hold these truths...!

We continue to debate the correct balance of church and state – disestablishment of course, but what does that mean – enfolding free exercise of religion? What about the underlying, foundational elements deeply ingrained from the Christian Faith?

The founding fathers were not of one mind about all the intricacies and applications – but it seems unequivocal that they looked to a Creator, Nature’s God, the Supreme Judge. Our founders looked to natural rights to defend religious freedom – being sure to keep such out of the hands of government. Today natural rights are practically ignored, as being too old-fashioned, out of date.

Again, just as a discussion starter, in better understanding our founders position on religion, and how they did differ on application – I’ll briefly share our first President’s thinking on this matter. General George Washington, an Episcopalian, believed that a pious citizenry was indispensable to republican government. He actually believed that the state could, and should nurture citizen’s religious beliefs and encourage religious practices.

Madison wanted government to be non-cognizant of religion, whereas Washington endeavored to use government to encourage and foster the religious character of the American people. In Washington’s farewell address he was direct and to the point. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable support.” Beware, historically, culturally – anyone who neglects this thought. He believed that religious morality establishes the very foundation on which republican government

rests. Following the dictates of good religion, one would be a good citizen. He wrote to the Baptists of Virginia; “For you doubtless, remember that I have often expressed my sentiment, that every man, conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity, according to the dictates of his own conscience.”

The Presbyterians were the first religious group to write him after his election. They had high praise for General Washington; “[We] esteem it a peculiar happiness to behold in our chief Magistrate, a steady, uniform, avowed friend of the Christian religion, who has commenced his administration in rational and exalted sentiments of piety, and who in his private conduct adorns the doctrines of the Gospel of Christ, and on the most public and solemn occasions devoutly acknowledges the government of divine providence.”

Washington is but one founding voice – but he should be heard, discussed and debated. “We Hold These Truths...” we need to know them, embrace them, and reason with them!

Lest we have forgotten – thankfully some things are etched in stone, or spoken word. In Washington D.C.;

- Every session of the Senate and the House begins with prayer. (Hey, where’s the court?) Oh, it’s down the street where the 10 Commandments are etched over the wall above the head of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. And every session of the court begins with these words spoken, “God Save the United States and this honorable Court!”
- In the Capital is a stained glass window showing George Washington kneeling in prayer. Behind him etched in the wall – Psalm 16:1 “Preserve me, O God, for in thee do I put my trust.”
- In the rotunda – there is a painting of pilgrims including their ship the speedwell. On the ship is the captain with an open book on his lap. Clearly seen are these words, “The Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”
- Engraved on Washington’s monument are these words, “Praise be to God!” on the walls as you ascend to the top are multiple Bible verses.
- At the Lincoln Memorial is etched his great second inaugural, which includes reference to God, the Bible, Providence; the Almighty and Divine attributes.
- The Library of Congress’s walls hold many Bible verses.
- At the Jefferson Memorial you will find this Jefferson quote, “God who gave us life also gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift from God? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is a God of justice, and that His justice cannot sleep forever.”

“We Hold These Truths...”

They are self-evident!

They were, are they now?

They should be!

Take 10 minutes this July 4<sup>th</sup> and reread our Declaration of Independence. It will do us good. Look to our Creator, Nature’s God, the Supreme Judge and give thanks for your/our freedom, our God given dignity that no other bestows, nor can take away!

God Bless America!

Amen.