

Jefferson's Declaration: Our Rebuttal
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I want to thank Professor David McKibbin, who helped me with the sermon. He is an expert on Thomas Jefferson, and he shouldn't be blamed for when I get it wrong, but he ought to get some credit for when I get it right. Thank you, David. I think he's here. Thank you.

His name was Fred. He was one who recalls when his children were small, and in a fit of patriotism spent six dollars on a firework. Well, there is a singular, I guess, to fireworks. There was only one. He promised to take his children out, and to show them something about the meaning of the 4th of July, and the firework was said to have the capacity to go "Boom" and it would send sparkles up and explode. It would be spectacular. So they went out into the country to a farm. They cleared off a place. It was safe. They were careful. And they waited until dark, and he read a couple lines from the Declaration of Independence, probably that part you heard, and then he lit the fuse, and it began to sparkle, and all eyes looked upward into the dark night sky. Nobody wanted to miss what was going to happen, because they all knew what would happen. They waited and they looked, and they waited and they looked, and they heard a sizzle and they looked down and the wretched missile just went poof. Sort of threw up on itself, and fell over. I hate it when that happens.

This morning, the day before the 4th, we light the fuse, we clear a place, we hear the sizzle. We wait. What does it mean, patriotism? And what does it mean to be a Christian patriot? It means to be driven by a destiny, and it means to be drawn by drama. And it is that tension between push and pull, driven and drawn. The patriot, one of the supreme patriots, Thomas Jefferson, had this portable writing table. Did you ever see it? Did you ever see a picture of it? A small table, a desk, he wrote the Declaration, the Declaration of Independence, three parts. The Preamble, that's what you heard this morning. The second part, grievances against the British. And the third part, how the colonies were free and independent states, and should be able to function that way. He looked to nature. He saw God and the natural order, and applied it to the political situation.

There are jokes we make about the way our government is run. If, for example, pro is the opposite of con, is progress the opposite of congress? It's Edward Bennett Williams who said politics is the gentle art of getting votes from the poor and campaign contributions from the rich, and promising to protect each from the other. Sometimes we think the statement Dolly Parton made about her public image applies to our current struggles to move toward a balanced budget, when she said, "It costs a lot to make a person look this cheap." And we can engage in endless sarcasm, born of cynicism, about our nation and its current image. But where would we rather live? And what kind of government would we rather have instead?

Barbara Jordan, the Texas senator, expressed it so well almost thirty years ago when she said, "What people want is very simple. They want an America as good as its promise."

The spirit of America is a destiny which ties our country with the order of nature, if you follow Jefferson's idea. We are not destined to rule over others. We are not destined to control or force. Our national order is freedom, and God does not control. It's our country, 'tis of God. Thomas Jefferson sat at a very small table, and he was driven by what his view of nature and God where it would lead. It was a four-year-old, in kindergarten, open house program was patriotic. This child showed the visitors a picture she had drawn, and as people came by, she would explain the picture. Someone said, "What is it?" and she said, "This is my country" and someone said, "Do you know the name of your country?" and she said, "Yes, I do. It is Tisofthee. My country Tisofthee.

Thomas Jefferson sat at a very small table, was driven by my country Tisofthee. David McCullough in his book *1776* writes, "In the ringing Preamble drafted by Thomas Jefferson, the document declared self-evident that we were all created equal with inalienable rights, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness." Thomas Jefferson sat at a very small table, was driven by a big idea. He declared that people could be free from the monarchy that at that time was the strongest military force in the world. It was a declaration without the means to enforce it. It was in the spirit, however, of Edgar Guest who wrote, "Somebody said it couldn't be done, but we, with a chuckle, replied that maybe it couldn't be, but we wouldn't be they who would say so until we had tried, and so we started to sing as we tackled the thing that couldn't be done, and se did it."

That is the spirit of America. Our country, tis of thee. Formed by ideals. Driven by an understanding that God is the creator and we are agents of God's creation. And the wisdom of science is a friend. And the will of freedom is a force. And God would will us to be free, not controlled even by God. Thomas Jefferson sat at a very small table and he got a big idea. My country, tis of thee. And that thought has not been squelched. Just ask the iron workers, the heavy equipment operators, the mason tenders, who cleared away the World Trade Center towers. This past May, the 9th anniversary of the recovery operation. They continue to find bone and other fragments. Long hours, separating parents from their children, and marriages threatened. Workers inhaling dust and smoke, producing for them asthma-like problems. Danny Doyle, iron worker, this past May, he said, "I remember coming out of the hole one day. It was Fleet Week. The Navy ships were in New York in the harbor. And the sailors all lined the path as we emerged, and the enlisted soldiers, and as we were coming up out of the hole, there they were, saluting us." My country, tis of thee. That's patriotism.

Jefferson sat at a small table and he got a big idea. My country, tis of thee. The spirit of America. We were in Oklahoma City about a week ago. We went to the memorial of the bombing of the Murrah building. Timothy McVeigh, you know. And they have, if you haven't seen it, this reflective pool, and on the bank opposite, in the place where the building was, these chairs, these chairs sit. 168 chairs. Small chairs for the 19 children who were killed, arranged in nine rows, each row representing one of the floors of the collapsed building, and where they were when the building collapsed. Each chair sitting on a block of glass, and a night, the lights turned on under those chairs in that glass. And the dead who died, their spirits light up the night. And like the survivor tree... there's this tree, and you can see it got blown over by the blast, and they thought that tree was dead,

and they were about to cut it down. It was a 90-year-old elm, and all at once, when they were preparing to do that, there was a sign of life and it bloomed. It survived. And on that tree these words. "The spirit of this city and this nation will not be defeated. Our deeply-rooted faith sustains us." You can bomb us, you can fly planes into our buildings, the spirit of America, but we will not forget Mr. Jefferson's big idea. Our nation tis of thee.

Lisa had a teacher in high school who taught her about the kind of God Thomas Jefferson worshipped. See, Jefferson believed in God in the laws of nature as it was expressed. He believed we are caretakers of God's world. Lisa's teacher told the class something she would never forget. The teacher's husband died suddenly of a heart attack. One week after the funeral, this teacher was back in the classroom. At the end of the day, she said, "I want you to know that the class is over, but there's something I want to tell you." She came and she sat on her desk, and she looked at the students. "I want to share with you a thought," she said. "On your way home from school, on your way back to school tomorrow, find something beautiful to notice. It doesn't have to be even something you see. It could be a scent. Possibly, freshly baked bread. Or it could be the sound of the breeze slightly rustling the leaves on the trees. Or it might be the way the morning light catches an autumn leaf as it falls gently to the ground. Look for those things. Cherish those things. These things are the stuff of life, and they are put there for us to enjoy."

Lisa said, "The class was very still. We picked up our books. We walked out of that room silently. That afternoon, I noticed more things on the way home than ever I had, and still I think of that teacher, and still I recall what she said, and still I try to appreciate those things. Sometimes I go barefoot in the grass, and sometimes on the way someplace, I'll just pull over and go find an ice cream store and order a cone with double dip ice cream." Lisa said this to the world on "Good Morning America." It's Thomas Jefferson's big idea, the right of all of us to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Lisa was inspired by that, and she needed in later life, she needed to employ that herself because Lisa, we remember Lisa Beemer's husband Todd and the others who prevented a plane from crashing into the capitol building, who brought that plane down in a field in Pennsylvania. Lisa Beemer, herself, an inspiration. And Todd, who said "Let's roll," and Lisa, who says, "Let's keep rolling."

A patriot knows our country tis of thee. The God we worship, the creator calls us. In the words of the theologian Sally McFague, "We think of ourselves as gardeners and caretakers and mothers and fathers and stewards and trustees and lovers and parents and co-creators and friends of the world. The world, while it gives us life, so we must return the favor. It depends upon us. Jefferson had a big idea. He sat at a very small table, and from that big idea he captured the spirit of our country. It is a spirit that says we may be down, but we are not out. It is a spirit that says, you can hurt us but you can't defeat us. It is a spirit that says, maybe we've got problems, that just means we have challenges, and we will find solutions. Of the people, by the people, and for the people. Freedom of religion, freedom of press, freedom of each person. It's about seeing God in nature. And finding God in the natural order, and being part of a world built on that order and the promise that we are part of something very big, and that our country has an obligation to

be as good as its promise. My country tis of thee, the patriots, we know who we are, and we are driven by our pride in the country is self evident, the spirit of America.

The Christian rebuttal to Jefferson's declaration is there. Jesus sat at a very long table and he had a simple idea. His idea simply was, "Remember me, remember me." What happens when we do that? It was a t-shirt, I saw some woman wearing it. I noticed it said, "My husband and I divorced over religious differences. He thought he was God and I didn't." If we remember Jesus, we realize who we are, and we know who we aren't. We are not God. Sammy Tippit said, "What is important in the Christian life is not how high we can jump, but how straight we can walk when we land again and come down." And there is a fine line between praying and whining. And if we remember Jesus, we know the difference, and we pray like he prayed. While Jefferson saw God in the cosmic order, we take it one step further and we see God in the cosmic Christ, to quote Matthew Fox, and in the cosmic Christ we discover meaning.

The great Scottish Biblical scholar William Barclay said, "There are two great days in a person's life, the day they were born and the day they find out why." Jesus sat at a very long table, and he had a simple idea: "Remember me," and we are drawn to that. What happens when we do that? We are drawn to that because when we do, we see what he was and we do what he did, and we learn why we've been born. "Remember me." In that moment, taking the bread, taking the cup, sharing it with them, he gave it to the disciples. It was a long table. All of them sat there in that upper room. Passover yielded to passion, victims became Christian in deed as well as creed.

Two weeks ago, at Annual Conference, that's all the Methodists in this area meeting, in Denver, I saw a student I had taught years ago in a class at Iliff School of Theology. His name is Roger Woolsey, and he is a campus minister in Boulder, and he was there selling the book that he wrote. And in the book, there was a story that he invited me to read. It happened at General Conference, when General Conference the whole church in the denomination worldwide met in Denver in 1996. This is when it happened. Roger was a student then, this is when I had him in class. And Roger went to that event at the convention center in Denver and he was confronted by some protesters. They carried signs of hate. They quoted Leviticus 18. The subject, obviously, was homosexuality, and he got into a debate. He said to the man holding the Leviticus sign, "Do you eat shrimp? Do you eat crab meat? Do you wear polyester/cotton blend shirts? Well, that's against the law. That's in Leviticus 11. You are picking and choosing your Biblical texts, your verses. You are a hypocrite." That's how it started. And they were shouting at each other, each of them proof-texting to the other, showing the other that he was wrong.

Roger writes, "I felt a breeze against the back of my leg. I turned and saw a tall man in a suit reaching between us with a large cookie in his hand, and he said, "Have a cookie, fellas." And that guy with the sign and I looked at each other, and at him, and we took the cookie being offered, and we broke it in half, and we started to enjoy the cookie, and the guy in the suit walked off without hardly even breaking stride, and we found ourselves still angry, but we began to look at the volume level, pulling it down some, and somehow we shifted to a more civil mode of slightly more rational debate, and eventually we

honored each other as being fellow Christians, and shook hands, and pledged that we would pray for each other. The cookie and the way it came to us was like Communion. It made both of us remember Jesus and act like it." Roger said to me two weeks ago, "You remember that?" You see, I was the tall man in the suit. I gave those two the cookie, and I said to Roger, "I remember it, but my intent, as your teacher and friend, had nothing to do with Communion. I wanted to get something in that guy's mouth so he would be quiet and give you a chance to talk." And Roger said, "I learned a lesson that day, that the Holy Spirit can work even through people like you, when you don't even know it."

Jesus sat at a long table, and he got a simple idea. "Remember me." Jaroslav Pelikan wrote in his book, *Whose Bible Is It?* (we're studying this book Wednesday noon) that the prophets claim that God spoke to them and they spoke to the people, but those of us in the Christian faith have a different view of that. Our view is that the word of God is incarnate in the life of Jesus, and when we remember him, it's about what he said, but it's also how he lived and what he did, and to remember him is to be reminded what we are to do. There's a member of our church who called the office six years ago and said he wanted to give the church some money, but there were strings attached. First of all, he wanted to be anonymous. Second of all, he wanted the church to use this money to support segments of the population that get overlooked. And finally, he wanted the church to rise to a higher level of competence, to recognize that good wasn't good enough. The church had to become great. The gift turned out to be over a quarter of a million dollars. It brought us the Faith Club authors, filled the sanctuary. It brought us Christa Tippet, from NPR. It brought us Rabbi Sandy Sasso. It paid for the Requiem two years ago. We filled the sanctuary on Good Friday. It supports a program for foster children. It supports a safe house for battered women. It gave funds to the Love in Action outreach program here. It provided the salary for the church librarian a couple of years, and Kids' Closet, clothing items for children in poverty. It gave educational supplies for Putnam School, has helped hundreds and hundreds of people, and our church does have a sense that good isn't good enough, we have to stretch from good to great.

Sadly, I must report, that donor is gravely ill today. In a visit with him this past Friday I said to him, "You know, you've done a lot of good for a lot of people." And he said, "Well, I've done some bad things, I suppose." I can't remember them. But he said, "Aren't we all put here to try to help?" And then he said, "People have been so good to me." He said, "Chuck there are such good people in the world." I said to him, "Yes, and you're one of them."

Jesus sat at a very long table and it reached Center Rehab, and here is one who heard Jesus as he broke the bread and gave the cup and spoke of the New Covenant. Here is one who lived his life and remembered. Jefferson sat at a small table. He had a big idea driven by the God of nature. My country tis of thee. Patriotism is a destiny, the spirit of America. And Jesus sat at a very long table. He got a simple idea, drawn by the words "Remember me." Christianity has a duty, and it takes both, the destiny and the duty, the idealism and the patriotism, the imperative of the believer. For us Christians, if we are patriotic but not Christian, our flags turn fanatic, and that's not patriotic. And if we are Christian but not patriotic, our cross will not have a context, and that's not Christian. The

table has to have its declaration and its rebuttal, otherwise, like the firework, when the fuse is lit, our patriotism and our Christianity, where it's supposed to go "Boom" will only go "poof." And we all hate it when that happens.