

Foreword

No shortage of opinions exist among people with differing ideas about the proper date of America's founding. When exactly did the seeds of the American experiment get planted, seeds that would eventually form the distinctive shape we see in modern American life? Was it in fact 1776, the year that thirteen separate states declared their independence from Great Britain? Some people argue quite persuasively for 1789, when the U.S. Constitution became the supreme law of the land. Then there is 1863, the year Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, altering the legal status of 3.5 million enslaved African Americans; or 1865, when the outcome of the Civil War changed *these* United States to *the* United States of America. Some enthusiasts for America's immigrant origins like the significance of 1886, the year the Statue of Liberty was dedicated in New York Harbor; or 1903, when Emma Lazarus' famous sonnet was affixed to the Statue's base. More recently, 1619 has gained favor as a date for our founding significance – the year enslaved people first began arriving by ship from West Africa.

For contemplating America's earliest underpinnings, my own preferred date of reference is 1630. In April of that year, while on board the ship *Arbella* en route to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Puritan leader John Winthrop delivered the sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity." In it, Winthrop laid the groundwork for some of what later came to be known both positively and negatively as American exceptionalism. "We must bear one another's burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren," he said. "We are entered into covenant with [God] for this work." Any breach of the covenant, which might occur through selfish or carnal pursuits in the present age, might well incite the wrath of God. Winthrop memorably referred to such wrath as a shipwreck.

"Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God. For this end, we must be knit together ... we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's

necessities ... we must delight in each other; make other's conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together."

This common bond of mutuality would be tested many times over the centuries. Citizens of America have experienced both remarkable success and failure in making other peoples' condition their own. The report card for our nation is mixed when it comes to consistently and wholesomely rejoicing together, mourning together, and laboring and suffering together. Every chapter of American history has engaged its own form of the debate on whether "we the people" refers more to a profound sense of community or merely to a collection of individuals.

For those enamored with personal rights, a rugged individualism has defined American identity. Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett are emblematic heroes of this impulse. Marching to the beat of one's own drum, charting one's own course, and following one's own dreams in a spirited way has enabled many to embrace a life dominated by self-interest. In place of cherishing transcendent biblical ideals like those expressed by Winthrop, hyper-individualists typically are more interested in making sure they get a sufficient piece of the American pie they consider their own.

For those Americans who understand the good life to be something greater than a disparate group of lone rangers claiming their individual rights and autonomy, the common good remains a prized concept. In their best moments, these individuals believe that the well-being of the whole is as, or more, important than their own well-being. Some of those who celebrate what Winthrop called "our bonds of [human] affection," understand that what they believe and think is not just their own business; it's also business that affects others. In other words, what's in their own hearts ends up impacting and shaping the ways they act in society. They consider both their citizenship and their faith to be something other than a self-project.

Any serious vision for mending a nation like ours, where the fabric of community gets frayed by competing religious and political forces, or sometimes shredded when those forces get weaponized, must include a deep sense of the way faith can inspire goodness. Not only do the best forms of faith teach us how to practice compassion and mercy; they also help us learn how to integrate acts of considerate justice for the sake of people who yearn for such.

Rick Rouse and Paul Ingram seem to grasp that *diversity* in and of itself is not a virtue. It's simply a demographic or geographic reality. When people with different backgrounds, languages, and identities live in relatively close quarters, there is diversity. The achievement of interfaith cooperation, however, does something with this diversity. It cultivates respect for people with different identities, encourages relationships between those who come from different tribes, and builds commitment among all towards a common good.

Martin Luther King Jr, in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, wrote about the ways in which we are all tied together despite our differences. We are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” said King, “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

From Winthrop's concept of covenant and mutual regard to King's inescapable network of mutuality, the American story is filled with promptings for its people to consider the needs and interests of others. For those who get excited by the prospect of building a life of meaning and possibility for the sake of other people enjoying similar goodness, this book serves as a fine resource. Only by threading our lives together with the divine gifts of justice, mercy, and humility will the torn or frayed fabric of our republic ever be mended.

Peter W. Marty, Publisher

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