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God Bless America – Matthew 7:13-14

We are blessed to live in this great country. Purple mountain majesties, fruited plains – what an amazing collection of spectacular beauty is contained in our United States!

That’s just the scenery. What so often makes me catch my breath is the vision of the people who brought our country into being. What can you say? That vision, that dream, was – and is – inspired by God.

The principles that motivated our founders are pure and high-minded. They show a great faith in the basic nature of humanity and reason. And, like the principles of our Christian faith, they are goals to achieve – set so high that very few people actually live up to them.

Perhaps you’ve heard the word “counterintuitive.” “Counter-intuitive” describes a concept that goes against intuition or common-sense expectation (but which is, nevertheless, true). A simple example: supposedly, bumblebees, given their size and weight, shouldn’t be able to fly – but they do!

Some American ideals are counterintuitive, too. Our nation's principles set before us goals that people don't just automatically *do* – they require we overcome some of our basic instincts to live up to them. Freedom of speech – it's hard to listen to something you absolutely believe is wrong! Freedom of religion – but everyone's religion? It wasn't all that long ago that Catholics and Jews were still kept on the margins of this society that upholds their freedom. Democracy? How does that work in practice? And really; *all* people are created equal? Over the two hundred-plus years of the United States, we have come a long way, but can anyone ever fully achieve our lofty ideals?

Jesus' words this morning are from the Sermon on the Mount. This is the most concentrated teaching of Jesus that we have in one place, full of God's truths that are, for human beings, counterintuitive. While Jesus doesn't use that word, these two verses illustrate it: the right path to follow isn't the path of least resistance or the one that first comes to mind. Jesus says, "The gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult..."

We, in these United States, in our country's founding vision, have chosen to go in through the narrow gate. Our society is designed to uphold principles that are not easy to follow, but which are right, just as our faith sets us on a path that is not a simple stroll. Remember: Jesus told us we to love our enemies, told us to pray for those who wrong us.

There is no way that doing that sincerely and faithfully is easy. It goes against so much of our instinct. It's like leaning into a left hook!

So, as Jesus says, few people find the narrow gate. It stands before you and me in our faith; it stands before us as a nation, in our country's principles and freedoms.

Now, am I saying that Christianity and America are the same? No. But what I am saying is that our faith calls us to support the great vision that is the ideal of our country, because the principles that define our country are such that the faithful believer can confidently affirm and pursue them in walking with God.

Now, these exalted ideals are strained today. They have been strained terribly in the past as well, and will continue to be as long as people are human! We struggle with how to understand what our freedoms should look like in today's world. We disagree about how to be the shining "city on the hill," as Ronald Reagan thought of America, using a phrase from this same sermon of Jesus.

But back in our past, when the United States of America was younger than some of you sitting here, this nation's very existence as well as its principles were challenged by the threat of civil war, a breaking apart, walking away from the lofty ideals set for us.

Interestingly enough, the controversy raged through a presidential election cycle. The man around whom the tensions gathered was the

winner of that election, Abraham Lincoln, and as the crisis came to a head, he was given the inspired vision to utter these words in his first inaugural address: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

We know that those “bonds of affection” were broken, for a time, by the Civil War. And we also know they were restored, insofar as humanly possible – we are one nation today, not two.

Once again, we face stressors that threaten to pull us apart. We have wide, wide differences among us about really important issues. There is disagreement about how to deal with threats to our nation, and even disagreement about what those threats are. Friends and family are alienated from each other, and there seems to be little real effort to restore those “bonds of affection” that Lincoln talked about.

Times are tough. When people are stressed, they fall back on instinct and survival. That’s built into us. What seems like common sense and what we think is best for ourselves can override principle, even conviction, and sometimes our beloved nation has taken paths that led away from its founding vision.

Still. God remains God. God has blessed America, and will continue to do so, because that's God's nature. God loves each and all of us, and urges us to enter through that narrow gate that leads to life.

What Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," I would call God working in, through, and among us.

We who are both Americans and Christians have a double dose of what is right. Not just the high ideals and vision of the founders of the United States, we have Jesus' words, the teaching of Scripture, our faith. The narrow gate set before us is narrow, no question. It is not easy. But "though passion may be strained, it must not break the bonds of our affection," we truly are in this together, and God will judge how well we live together, how well we live up to the goals we've been given. God bless America.