Sunday, July 4, 1976
ONE NATION UNDER GOD
Matthew 22:15-22

Some years ago, within the memory of many of us, the Congress of the United States passed legislation — with little or no dissent - inserting the phrase “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, “One nation, under God.” Long before that, Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address had used the phrase, “that this nation under God may have a new birth of freedom.”

It is appropriate today as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of this nation to ask again as Christians and as citizens of the United States, what it means to be “One nation under God.”

Let’s begin with the Bible and its approach to government. In our scripture reading for this morning, we read how some of the opponents of Jesus tried to entangle him in a controversy. They asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” They were asking, how should a person who is a believer in God relate to the state - particularly to an imperialistic state like Rome?

Jesus asked to see a coin and he asked them, “Whose picture and inscription is this?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” Then Jesus said, “Render the ref ore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” We can paraphrase that statement to say, “Render to God what belongs to God and to the state or nation what belongs to the state or nation.”

Note particularly that Jesus was not saying that he necessarily approved of or sympathized with imperialism of Rome or that form of government. But Jesus recognized as does the Bible as a whole, that the state or government of some kind is necessary for the ordering of human affairs and human life on this earth. Because of this everyone has certain duties to the state in which he or she holds citizenship if that particular political society is to preserve order and establish justice.

Without government of any kind there is anarchy. And the warning against anarchy, because of the unruliness or sinful nature of human beings, is one of the persistent emphases in the New Testament and in all Christian thinking about the state and the role of government.

In other words, the New Testament and the Christian faith recognize the need for the state, for government, for the ordering of society, while at the same time making it clear that there are things which do not belong to the affairs of state, but to God. The state was made for man, not man for the state.

This means that as Christians we are to take a positive attitude toward the order-creating function of civil government, because in and through such ordering, God is at work in preserving essential conditions for human life. It means also that the state is to be kept in place and not be allowed to usurp the place of God. Thus, Jesus said--"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus was here talking about much more than paying taxes.

Now this does not mean that the state or government is assigned one whole area of a person’s life while God and the church have only to do with so-called spiritual matters. It’s to our good

fortune that this was not the case when this nation was founded. Although in 1776, religion attracted only about ten percent of the population, whereas today about sixty-two percent are enrolled in churches, religion in 1776, was a very public religion. As one church historian put it, “It seeped in under the doors, came through the woodwork, was part of the air one breathed.” Part of the problem in our time is that the more “religious” religion becomes, the less impact it has on society.

The Bible reminds us· that as religious people we have to be as concerned about personal and political freedom as we are about spiritual freedom and freedom of worship.

Our Constitution talks about a legal independence of church and state, but this means that the state or any kind of governing body in this country cannot require religious devotion or prohibit its free exercise. For example, the State of Nebraska cannot require that the Lord’s Prayer be said every day in school as one senator wanted the State Legislature to do this past year. It means also that the state is neutral as between the religious beliefs and that it will not establish one religion or brand of religion as the official religion of the country.

With this in mind, what do we mean then when we say we are “one nation under God?”

1. First, note particularly the preposition “under.” To believe seriously in a nation under God is to acknowledge God’s sovereignty over everything and God’s judgment on our nation, as on all nations and the world itself. Today, that we are under God is to say that the nation is not itself God or equal with God.

Furthermore, to be under God does not mean that God endorses any one kind of political or economic system, but that God judges and uses them all. For example, some people make the mistake of trying to equate Christianity with capitalism. There is no, one Christian economic system. God is not a capitalist, or a socialist or a communist, nor is God a democrat or a republican. God is God. In a similar vein, no one person or party has a divine right to rule.

To ·be under God means that God judges all political and economic systems in their performance of providing liberty and justice to human beings. Our present system of government, I believe, provides a greater amount of liberty and justice than any other government presently functioning in the major nations of this earth. Reinhold Niebuhr liked to say, that “man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, while man’s capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.”

2. Secondly, to believe that we are one nation under God, means also that all nations everywhere whether they realize it or not, are under God. The whole creation is subject to God and God desires that we live in harmony and peace with one another and with the creation as a whole. Today in particular we have to think in global terms.

3. Thirdly, to believe that we are one nation under God is a constant reminder that we are not to make the nation itself a god. The first commandment is: “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.” There is a sharp difference between patriot.sm and nationalism. Love of country is proper and desired. That’s good patriot-ism. Nationalism, however, is the kind of belief that our country can never be wrong or make a mistake and that we are always better than anyone else.

4. Fourthly, to believe that we are one nation under God is also a warning against equating “Americanism” with Christianity. Years ago, our missionaries often made the mistake of

converting people not only to the Christian faith but to American customs as well. There is always the danger of accommodating our Christian faith to American culture and in so doing having our faith bless whatever is, rather than having it as a standard against which we judge all things.

For this reason, I believe it is wise to have a healthy skepticism of political leaders as well as religious leaders who claim to have a special relationship with God. The most truly religious of all of our presidents was Lincoln, and he understood the danger of equating his policies with God's will. In his second inaugural address he noted that the "Almighty has his own purposes."

Beware of people who are completely sure and certain that they know God's will for our nation or who are certain that our nation has a special status above all others in the accomplishment of God's will. Recently I heard a politician say in a television address — "Call it mysticism if you will, but I believe God had a divine purpose in placing this land between the two great oceans to be found by those who have a special love of freedom and the courage to leave the countries of their birth." Our American Indian brothers and sisters who were herded onto reservations might have a different view of the matter. And our black brothers and sisters who were brought here from Africa as slaves would also have a different view.

Beware too of religious leaders who claim they are especially chosen by God above all others — persons like Sun Myung Moon, the Korean who claims he is the Lord of the Second Advent, the third Adam, the new Messiah. Moon's followers are taught that it was his mission to marry and father children whose blood was not tainted by Satan. They also are taught to believe that he is succeeding where Jesus failed.

Moon says that God has chosen him to establish his Kingdom on earth and that the United States is God's final bulwark on earth. That's blasphemy! To say that we are one nation under God does not mean that we are God's chosen people.

As we are celebrating our 200th birthday, the phrase "one nation under God" reminds us again that we need to be careful lest we are tempted to believe that God has appointed the United States to redeem a sinful world. We have our own sins to take care of as we have been reminded particularly in the last several years and most recently with the Hays affair in Congress.

In fact, the phrase, "one nation under God," should underscore for us again the fact that in some manner this country functions on the basis of a higher principle than congressional pragmatism or winning at any cost. We have the right and obligation to celebrate our 200th birthday by proclaiming we are a people who live by a standard other than "just don't get caught."

Above all, to be one nation under God reminds us that there is no meaning to life or to anything if we look purely to human roots and causes. The meaning can only come when we have some understanding of the power of a God who transcends our limitations.

Let me quote Niebuhr again. "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime: therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

If we on our 200th birthday and in the coming years remember that we are a nation under God, I have hope that this nation under God, will continue to have a new birth of freedom. It was Jesus Christ who talked of being born again. Freedom like people must be born again, and again. It can never simply persist. And true freedom comes only when we are truly “under God.”