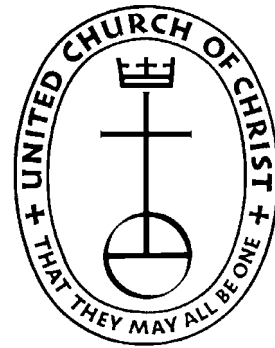


# An Independence Day Sermon — The Two Americas

A Sermon By —  
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July 4, 2010



This sermon describes the increasingly huge gap between “Winner America” and “Loser America,” between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. It calls on us as a church to have the courage to stand with those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder and work to challenge and dismantle a system that allows 5% of the people to have more wealth than everyone else put together.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
June 13, 2010 (#1406)

First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

Reading: Jeremiah 8:4-6,11; Luke 4:16-18

## An Independence Day Sermon – The Two Americas

The United States Declaration of Independence, adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, announced that the thirteen American colonies were now independent states, free of British control. That declaration's most famous line reads, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Now that is a noble vision, and throughout our nation's history we have struggled to bring that vision to fruition; to achieve that fundamental equality – one united nation of equals.

But racism has often meant two Americas – one for whites with abundant rights and privileges, and another for people of color with limited rights and privileges. Sad chapters in our history reflect inequality in relation to Native Americans, African Americans and immigrants from many nations.

Sexism has meant two Americas – one for men with bounteous opportunities and power, and one for women with restricted opportunities and limited power.

Heterosexism has created two Americas – one for straight folks who can marry and be open about who they are, one for lesbian and gay people who can't marry and who must constantly remember, "don't ask, don't tell."

There is one America with plentiful opportunities for those of us who are relatively healthy, and another America with stereotyped prejudices and limited access for those with disabilities.

Racism, sexism, heterosexism and discrimination against those with disabilities – all those forces are still alive, dangerous and incredibly harmful.

But I think there is yet another division leading to two Americas – a division perhaps deeper and more diabolical than all the others. It is the division that Peter Laarman, Executive Director of Progressive Christians Uniting, calls "Winner Americans" over against "Loser Americans," rich Americans in contrast to poor Americans, the haves and the have nots.

The notion of two Americas emerging from class differences is not a new idea. In my office, I have a yellowed copy of Michael Harrington's 1963 book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, the book that sparked the 1960s War on Poverty.

Cleve Jones, a courageous gay leader who worked with Harvey Milk, co-founded the San Francisco AIDS foundation and conceived the idea of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, was here at the church recently for a meeting between LGBT leaders and labor leaders. At that meeting he said he is becoming increasingly convinced "it's all about class" – about divisions based on income, employment and inherited wealth.

The wealth gap in America is getting worse and worse. In the thirty years between 1975 and 2005, U.S. households in the bottom 80% income bracket saw their share of national income fall while the top 20% experienced an increase.

The United Nations has a statistical measure they use to determine the equality of a nation's distribution of family income. According to the UN, the United States has the highest level of inequality of any industrialized nation. So much for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July declaration – "all created equal."

In 1950, the ratio of an average American executive's paycheck to the average worker's was 30:1. Today that ratio ranges from 300-500 to one.

Liberal, moderate and conservative economists all acknowledge that the gap between America's rich and poor is growing in dramatic and dangerous ways.

Peter Laarman recently wrote: "I was reminded of the two Americas last week when the US Department of Agriculture announced a huge spike in what it calls 'food insecurity'; what most people would translate as hunger or malnutrition. One in seven US households experienced some degree of food insecurity last year – 50 million people not getting enough to eat, a large portion of them children." This is not hunger in Africa: 50 million hungry Americans.

Laarman says: "So what is life like in Loser America: employment desperation, rising hunger, looming homelessness, untreated illness, rising rates of substance and family abuse, and soaring enlistments in the military as the only remaining escape hatch from all of this misery."

But I don't have to tell you that because many of you are trapped in Loser America – through no fault of your own, you are out of work, deep in debt, behind on your rent, mortgage payments or utility bills, and can't afford health care coverage. Or if not you, your children or grandchildren or neighbors are in that situation.

But what about those at the top of Winner America? Well, in spite of the recession, they are doing quite well – which is why they keep assuring us that things are getting better.

Peter Laarman says, “Big banks are now reporting respectable earnings from trading with our tax dollars. Wall Street is on track for record profits and executive payouts this year. Big insurance will be getting almost everything it wants in the health industry bailout package.” (sometimes called health care reform)

There are two distinct worlds of winners and losers – and the gap grows bigger. In ancient Israel in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, there were violent undertones and class conflicts. Jeremiah was a courageous prophet who dared criticize his nation and its ruler.

Listen to what Jeremiah said were God’s words to Israel’s leaders:

*When you fall, you cannot stand again. If you go astray can you ever find your way back? Why does this people persist in apostasy? They have clung to lies and refused to return. I, God, listened closely but they do not speak the truth. They dress my people’s wounds carelessly, saying “Peace, Peace,” knowing there is no peace.*

Those words, “‘Peace, Peace,’ knowing there is no peace,” speak to today’s false assurances that things are getting better.

So on this Independence Day, when we see how far we are from that original vision of liberty and equality for all – what is it that progressive churches should say and do?

Well, let me move to our second reading, from Luke. Jesus was probably part of John the Baptist’s Jewish reform movement. He left that movement and ventured into the wilderness for a time of contemplation. Returning to Nazareth, at a Shabbat service he used Isaiah’s words to describe the new ministry to which he felt called:

*The Spirit of our God is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, release to those in prison. To proclaim the year of God’s favor.*

That was what Jesus’ whole ministry was about – bringing good news to the poor and setting free those held in various forms of captivity. There were two Roman Empires just as there are two Americas. 80-90% of those living in the Empire were peasants; struggling like people in Loser America. Jesus was himself a peasant sage from Loser Rome who contrasted God’s realm, where unity prevails and all are valued as children of God, with the realm of Rome which used the labor of many to support the

affluence of a few.

If we follow that peasant teacher today, what should the church, in his name, be saying and doing? Let me list three things that strike me.

**First, those of us who seek to follow Jesus who are also part of Winner America must place ourselves at the side of those who are trapped in Loser America.** We must stand with and advocate for those who are out of work, who labor in our hotels and other workplaces for non-living wages, who have no health insurance, whose children start school with three strikes against them.

It is clear that in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, whenever there is an economic crisis, those who are least able to do so are forced to pay for it. We balance the state budget not by taxing those who are rich, but by stripping those with disabilities of their care givers, by increasing the size of our classrooms and laying off teachers, by cutting back on programs that help people find jobs, by paying state workers the minimum wage. How do you think Jesus would view that? We have made the word “tax” the equivalent of “sin” in our society. But Jesus used that word “sin” to speak of greed. It is not poor children who ought to pay for this state’s debt. It is those whose lives of consumption and greed boggle the mind.

And in order for the church to stand with those in Loser America, I think we must let go of our nostalgia for a past where we were the ones in power, for days when we proudly polished our image as a successful church. Yes, there was a day when the First Congregational Church of Long Beach was at the heart of this city’s power establishment. But those days are over, and if we stand with Loser America those in power will increasingly avoid us.

And along with letting go of our nostalgia, we must also let go of our fear of the consequences of taking courageous stands on behalf of those in Loser America. If we proclaim spineless pabulum, if we don’t challenge inequality and injustice, we may hang onto to some pledges and we may continue our reputation as a flagship church – but we may lose our soul as a community of faith. Yes, we may eventually end up a small remnant church – but one that would be closer to Jesus and his cluster of poor disciples; one more in alignment with his teachings and example.

**Secondly, we must become a Social Justice Church.** Biblical scholar Ched Myers said, “In a word, the Bible is about justice, not charity.” Years ago, evangelical leader Jim Wallis and some of his seminary classmates decided to take a Bible and with a pair of scissors cut out every reference to working on behalf of the poor. When they finished, they were left with a decimated book in tatters. The Bible is about behavior, not belief; it

is about caring for the poor in our midst, for immigrants, for the outcast.

“The Spirit of our God is upon me because God has sent me to preach good news to the poor.” That good news has to be more than a free meal – it must be liberation that ends the poverty that marks Loser America.

We praise charity, but are often wary of social justice. The late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil, said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

And Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The difference between social service and social justice is that social service works to alleviate hardship while social justice aims to eradicate the root causes of that hardship.” Progressive churches must center their life around social justice, around healing a wounded world.

And my friends, we don’t do much of that at this church. We devote more and more energy to meeting our own needs and less and less to eliminating those realities that trap people into Loser America. If we are truly going to follow Jesus, it is not enough to sit in a beautiful building listening to powerful music and feeling good about ourselves.

It is great that we feed the hungry and homeless on Sunday afternoons, but we also must do something to change a system that is creating more and more hungry people.

In the last several years, our Social Justice Committee floundered and fell apart, our Board of Outreach is struggling, our Peace Action Committee disbanded, our Open and Affirming Committee fell apart. We have fewer and fewer people joining the CROP walk to make a statement about hunger, or walking in the Martin Luther King Parade or the annual Pride Parade. We no longer even have a booth at the Pride Festival to show that we are a church that cares about justice for the gay community.

The gap between Winner America and Loser America is widening – and if we are going to stand with those in Loser America, we are going to have to make social justice a priority and we are going to have to walk our talk.

**And then finally, we are going to have to be willing to let our theology and biblical understanding engage issues of money, wealth, consumption and capitalism.** And those are issues churches are reluctant to consider.

We are in an era when elected positions of leadership and power in our nation are increasingly purchased by big corporations and wealthy individuals from Winner

America. We need to have theological conversations about what that means in relation to Jesus' sense of God's realm.

In an time of incredible consumerism, where shopping is a favorite pastime and consumption the ultimate goal, we need to create a theology of relinquishment, of letting go.

After producing his recent documentary on capitalism, Michael Moore wrote an essay about his own Catholic theology and capitalism. Let me share two paragraphs:

*Amidst all the Wall Street bad guys and corrupt members of Congress exposed in "Capitalism: A Love Story," I pose a simple question in the movie, Is capitalism a sin? I go on to ask, Would Jesus be a capitalist? Would he belong to a hedge fund? Would he sell short? Would he approve of a system that has allowed the richest 5% to have more financial wealth than the 95% under them combined?*

*I have come to believe that there is no getting around the fact that capitalism is opposite everything Jesus (and Moses, Mohammad and Buddha) taught. All the great religions are clear about one thing: It is evil to take the majority of the pie and leave what's left for everyone to fight over.*

Do we at this church have the courage to join Michael Moore in that conversation about Jesus and capitalism?

Listen to Martin Luther King who in 1967 challenged the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to open that same conversation. King said: "And one day we must ask the question, Why are there forty million poor people in America? And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society."

The Fourth of July is about a vision, a noble and glorious vision of a nation built on equality. That vision coincides with the vision of our faith about everyone being God's child and about the importance of sharing the resources entrusted to us.

The best way to celebrate the Fourth of July is not to hide behind the curtains of nostalgia, but instead to look at how far we have strayed from that founding vision and to reflect on what we can do to bring the two Americas back together.