

We Hold These Truths (Summer Saints 2021: Rev. John Witherspoon)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 4, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift ... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16, NRSV)

We're well into our Summer Saints at this point, having looked at Soren Kierkegaard and then, last week, Sojourner Truth. While I have not consciously chosen individuals because I think there's a chance you may never have heard of them, being freshly introduced to someone new does give us a chance to hear them fresh, without any pre-conceptions or misconceptions getting in the way. And we have taken from these first two some valuable lessons on the nature of the Truth that is the gospel.

Today, with the 4th of July holiday in the air, I thought I'd introduce you to someone who had an important role in the founding of the United States – even if he is one who is fairly unknown to most of us. But his impact was real and lasting, and we have much to be grateful for in his life and work, and much to learn from.

I speak of course of the Scottish-born Presbyterian minister and Founding Father John Witherspoon, who served as the 6th President of what would become Princeton University, and as a member of the Continental Congress. He was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence (the only clergyman to do so!), and would go on to be among those voting to ratify the U.S. Constitution. And if all that wasn't enough, in 1789 he was the convening moderator of the very *first* General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the new *United States of America!*

Witherspoon was born on February 5, 1723 in Yester, Scotland. He was the son of a Presbyterian minister and of a mother who herself came from a long line of clergy said to

extend back to John Knox himself. By the age of four he could read from the Bible and would eventually be able to recite most of the New Testament. When he was 13 years old, based on his studies in English, mathematics, Latin, Greek, and French, he was sent off to university at Edinburgh. By the age of 20, he had obtained a Masters degree and his Doctorate in Theology, and with it, a license to preach. Receiving his first parish in 1745, Witherspoon married soon after and, from this marriage, would father 10 children, 5 of whom survived to adulthood.

For the next 20 years, he served within the Church as a prominent pastor and theologian, notable in his support of the evangelical stirrings in Britain and America at the time, so associated with the likes of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John and Charles Wesley. His reputation as a pastor, scholar, and leader grew so much, in fact, that he was actively pursued by the Trustees of the College of New Jersey (today's Princeton University) to become the President of the college after the death in 1766 of its 5th president Dr. Samuel Finley. Dr. Benjamin Rush and Richard Stockton, later themselves signers of the Declaration of Independence, were sent to Scotland to recruit Witherspoon for the position.

And so, in May 1768, he set sail with his family for Philadelphia and landed in August. Upon his arrival in Princeton, Witherspoon found the school in debt, with weak instruction, and a clearly lacking library collection. He immediately began fund-raising (both locally *and* back home in Scotland), added three hundred of his *own* books to the library, and began purchasing scientific equipment, many maps, and a terrestrial globe.

He also instituted a number of reforms, modeling the college's syllabus and structure after that used at the University of Edinburgh and other Scottish universities. He also firmed up entrance requirements, which helped the school compete with Harvard and Yale for scholars.

As the college's primary focus when he started was training clergy, Witherspoon immediately became a major leader of the early Presbyterian Church in the American colonies. Nonetheless, he transformed the school into one that would go beyond this limited scope and equip future leaders of a new country. Among his own personal students would come 12 state governors, 10 Cabinet officers; 12 members of the Continental Congress, 3 U.S. Supreme Court Justices, 49 members of the House of Representatives, 28 U.S. senators, and one particularly diminutive man from Virginia named James Madison.

Though always an ordained minister, Witherspoon took this approach because he saw no conflict between faith and reason and encouraged his students to test their faith by experiment and experience. He was also careful *not* to protect students from exposure to ideas that were in conflict with his own strong convictions. The many books he added to the library himself gave them access to a wide range of contemporary thought, including works by authors with whom he vehemently disagreed.

It may go without saying that his administration was a turning point in the life of the college – and it had effects beyond the world of academia, for by 1770 students in the college were openly advocating in favor of the patriot cause, and they were encouraged by Witherspoon

himself who, in a commencement address, urged resistance to the English Crown. In 1774-1775 he represented his county in the New Jersey provincial assembly, successfully agitated for the removal and imprisonment of the Royal Governor, and subsequently received an appointment to the Continental Congress and was appointed Congressional Chaplain by John Hancock.

It is said that on July 2, 1776, in response to a delegate who opposed the ratification of the freshly composed Declaration of Independence by saying the colonies were not “ripe for revolution,” Witherspoon replied, “Not *ripe* sir? We are not only ripe for the measure but in danger of rotting for the want of it.” And so, he and the other patriot delegates signed the Declaration and mutually pledged their Lives, their Fortunes, and their sacred Honor.

And it wouldn’t take long for that pledge to be tested, for soon after, the war entered New Jersey territory, and Witherspoon was forced temporarily to close the college. The British soon occupied its buildings and burned its library. Many of his personal papers were burned or destroyed at this time, and the next year, James, one of his sons, lost his life at the Battle of Germantown, Pennsylvania. Despite these tragedies, Witherspoon held on and was able to re-open the college, with classes beginning again in November 1778.

He also stayed with the Continental Congress until 1782 and served with prodigious energy. He aided in the reorganization of the Board of Treasury, drafted a letter of thanks to Lafayette, designed seals for the Treasury and Navy Departments, and in general served on more committees than we could possibly imagine. But none of these pursuits kept him from also being essential to the organization of a newly-constituted denomination in the new country – the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America – and in 1789 he convened its very first General Assembly with a sermon.

John Witherspoon died at his home in Princeton on November 15, 1794. His gravestone in Presidents’ Row in the town cemetery still stands today and describes – in Latin, of course! – a man who was “among the most brilliant luminaries of learning and of the Church – at length, universally venerated, beloved, and lamented.”

There is perhaps no better example of the distinctive Presbyterian ethos than John Witherspoon. As well as anyone who has ever lived, he embodied our tradition’s particular understanding of the Christian life, a life of faithful engagement with the world – not splitting life into two separate spheres of the spiritual and the worldly ... of Sunday matters on one hand and rest-of-the-week matters on the other ... but engaging the *whole* of life – the spiritual, the material, the personal, and the social – as if it were all encompassed by the sovereignty of God.

It’s probably not too much to say that this doctrine of the Sovereignty, or rule, of God – though interpreted in different ways – has been the sun around which everything else in the Reformed and Presbyterian theological universe revolves. When we say that God is “sovereign,” we mean that all things are under God’s rule and control, and that nothing happens without divine direction or permission. God’s purposes are all-inclusive and never thwarted; nothing takes God

by surprise. The sovereignty of God is not merely that God has the power and right to govern all things, but that God does so everywhere, always and without exception.

It is certainly true that in more recent times, this doctrine has been the subject of much re-thinking in the face of intellectual and moral challenges to it in light of our experience of egregious evil and suffering. But it is also true that deep in the Presbyterian heart is the conviction that somehow – in spite of everything – God really is working out the Divine purpose in and through all events, even if we have no idea how that could be. We all struggle with reconciling God’s goodness and power with our own experiences of suffering and pain, but we take comfort from that most Presbyterian of all scripture verses, from the Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28, NRSV)

And this deep conviction of God’s sovereignty is not just about world events or the events in our lives, but extends to our salvation as well. Running deep in the Presbyterian soul is the conviction that whenever and wherever salvation happens, it is *God’s doing*, *God’s initiative*, *God’s grace* which accomplishes what we could not on our own.

And so, for us, the life of faith then is not a life in *pursuit* of salvation, trying to earn one’s way into God’s love, but rather, a life of gratitude for a salvation already given. It is a life lived in deep awareness of God’s ever-present grace. It is that grace which frees us to will and to do God’s will, and thereby honor God in *all* of life – in our relationships, in our families, in our work, and in our public service.

I don’t know if Witherspoon ever used these words, but you could call it an intentional *this-worldliness*, for if God is sovereign in and over all things, and if the whole of our lives is to honor and glorify God, then that also means that our lives in the world are to reflect this purpose. We are to engage our culture and society and seek to bring about their transformation in the light of God’s will and purposes.

Presbyterian faith strives to take the world as seriously as God does in Jesus Christ ... it strives to live as thoroughly in the world as Jesus himself did ... strives to follow him obediently into the world that he loves. Some Christian traditions could be accused of being so focused on the hereafter that they suggest that life in *this* world doesn’t matter. But no one would ever accuse real Presbyterians of this. Presbyterians have always sought to relate faith and culture, faith and society, and bring glory to God in all of it.

And therefore, It shouldn’t be surprising that Presbyterians like John Witherspoon were at the forefront of the American Revolution – it being referred to once in the British Parliament as “that Presbyterian rebellion.” The idea that God is sovereign *is* a most revolutionary one – for if *God* is sovereign, then that must mean that no *human* ruler or institution is. All are finally answerable to the One who truly is sovereign.

While it would be too much to say that our country's system of government was simply copied from the Presbyterian model of church government – even Witherspoon couldn't have pulled that off! – it is fair to say that both reflect a core concern: In the name of God, to resist tyranny ... both the tyranny of too much power in the hands of one fallible human being (such as a King, a Pope, or a President) and the tyranny of the mass mob. Both systems of governance seek to spread power around – given our human frailties – and to cultivate a common life of liberty under law.

John Witherspoon epitomized this deep engagement with the world and so has served as an inspiration for generations of faith-inspired folk seeking to address the great issues in our common life ... from racial justice to struggles for peace, from the pursuit of equality to acts of resistance against oppression. Efforts at community uplift, social justice, and policy advocacy are central to our tradition's understanding of what we are called to do.

Of course, as fallible human beings, we often fail to get things right, even with the best of intentions, and John Witherspoon was no exception. He was a man of his time and, joining the likes of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others, he could sign on and speak eloquently of all human beings being “created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” while not consistently living out these lofty words in his own life – though even here, in fairness, he was often inconsistent with those inconsistencies too.

He had some blind spots, but what he *could* see and *did* see has given future generations – has given *us* – striving to be faithfully engaged disciples, a means and a drive to see better and to do better, as God gives it to us to see and to do what is right. May we therefore cultivate lives of compassion, and build communities founded on justice, and strive for a country in which *all* are truly free for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – to the glory of God! Amen.