
Prologue: Bicentennial Sunday in Mendocino

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

—Katherine Lee Bates,
America the Beautiful

The fog had lifted early on the morning of July 4, 1976, so the village was visible as I crested the hill on the highway coming in from the south. The view struck me as spectacular but incongruous. The town—false storefronts, high-pitched roofs, rickety water towers, and especially the tall church steeple—was a transplant from New England. But the setting—the crisp air, the browned hillsides, the blooming wildflowers, the brilliant light, and the deep blue of the ocean—was Mediterranean. It was, in fact, California, where I was lucky to be doing a half year of sociological research.

Main Street

There were many other temporary residents. Along the street were parked the cars of weekenders and summer vacationers. There were station wagons from Washington and Arizona, sporty cars from Nevada, a smattering of sedans from points east, and California Winnebagos, Peugeots, and BMWs. Bumper stickers on some cars

announced that the occupants were for Ford or Carter or would rather be skiing. These tourist vehicles competed for streetside space with beat-up vans, buses, pickups, and VW bugs that bore the dust of country roads and implored onlookers to save the whales or honk if they loved Jesus. In the driveways of the white-painted houses, or under the flowered trellises of their carports, were the Chevrolets and Toyotas of those who lived in town.

People were out walking and wandering into galleries and boutiques. Some stopped by the displays of the jewelry and pottery vendors who set up their tables on the wooden sidewalk. A dark-haired woman in a richly colored poncho presided over a mobile burrito stand. Garlicky smells came out of a store that called itself the Deli, and people paused to read the announcements on the bulletin board outside. The World's Largest Salmon Barbeque had been held on July 3 in Fort Bragg. The Mendocino Bicentennial Parade and Birthday Celebration, featuring floats, a marching band, songs, and a recitation of the Declaration of Independence, was to begin at noon. Someone had puppies to give away, and a young family needed a house to rent. A handyman offered honest work at low rates, and a Tai-Chi class was forming. Next to the Deli, other strollers stopped to look down on the ducks swimming in the remnant of a drought-stricken pond.

The busiest place in town that morning, though, was not the street, the galleries, the shops, or the brushy path above the ocean cliffs. It was the parking lot beneath that tall steeple, the parking lot of Mendocino Presbyterian Church.

E Pluribus Unum

Inside the white wooden church, a large congregation was gathering in the quarter hour before eleven that morning. The organist played a medley of American hymns as the worshippers filed in. To each person entering, the ushers handed a mimeographed bulletin containing the order of worship and announcements for the week. A rack on the back of each pew held sufficient hymnals for every other worshipper. Friends greeted each other, settled in, and waited for the peal of the great bell to signal the start of the service.

The interior of the church would be familiar to anyone with a reformed, or New England Congregational, church background. In a word, it was plain. Rows of pews fixed to the floor of the sanctuary faced a raised platform (here called the chancel) on which stood a lectern on the left and the pulpit on the right. Next to the lectern stood

the American flag; by the pulpit, a church flag. A piano stood below the lectern, and across the front of the sanctuary to the right was an organ console. At the far end of the chancel was a narrow, wooden table that held a candelabrum. Under it was a vase of flowers, and above it was a large, ungainly cross made of driftwood. Hanging on the walls to each side of the chancel were two quilted soft sculptures picturing descending doves. The cross, the flags, the flowers, the candles, the quilts—these were the only decorations in the sanctuary. The ceiling was pitched and open, and the lighting fixtures were a single chandelier in the center and electrified kerosene lanterns along the sides. The windows were of unadorned, amber-colored glass. The two aisles leading from back to front were covered with resilient, sound-absorbent carpet, but the effect was less of ornament than of utility.

The organ moved through *God of Our Fathers* and *Rock of Ages* to *Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen* and *Amazing Grace* while the congregation assembled. The bulletin proclaimed that “this worship service is dedicated to the glory of almighty God in thankfulness to him for our nation.” Prayers, responsive readings, hymns, anthems, an offering, and some special readings and a psalm lining were scheduled along with the sermon. The hymns were to include *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *America the Beautiful*. Plans for the parade, a box-lunch auction, and an afternoon picnic were announced in the bulletin. A poem on some personal implications of “independence,” written by a member of the congregation, was included. Inspirational quotations from Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy were printed. Much of the verbal content of the service to come, but not the sermon, was thus available for perusal prior to its start.

Shortly before eleven, the fifteen rows of pews were packed, a dozen or more from side to side, across the two aisles. In this rural California setting, the worshippers were all white, but they were otherwise a mixed lot. About one in five were elderly women, many sitting together, several toward the front where the pews were fitted with hearing aids. Another two-fifths were couples in various stages of middle age, from forties to late sixties, some of them sitting with their college-age children, home for the summer. In their dresses, slacks, and sport coats, these women and men would not surprise a visitor to any Presbyterian church, though ties among the men and hats among the women were few. But another third were much younger couples, in their twenties and thirties, many of the women dressed in gingham and the men in plaid shirts and jeans. Some of these couples were accompanied by their school-age children, wearing T-shirts carrying the insignia of the Good Shepherd School. Most

of these women had long hair; some of their husbands wore mustaches and a few were bearded. A scattering of single men and women, of similar age and dress, sat among them, close under the pulpit on the right-hand side.

At the rear of the church, attired in maroon robes, the adult choir began to line up. Next to the choir, carrying Bibles, stood the minister, a man of about forty wearing a business suit and a turtleneck, and a lay reader, wearing dungarees and a leather jacket, and they waited while the head usher, an ancient, stooped man, began to pull on the rope at the base of the steeple to ring the two-minute peal mandated for the occasion by President Ford's proclamation. As the sound of the bell died away, the usher moved across the back of the church to a ledger fixed to the wall and inscribed "223" for the day's attendance. The minister and the lay reader went forward to the chancel.

"Happy Fourth of July," the minister began. "HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY!" shouted the people back to him, and the assembly became a gathered congregation. The minister asked the people to greet those around them, and having allowed a minute for the ensuing hubbub, he repeated some of the announcements from the bulletin, drawing attention to the participation of the church choir in the afternoon parade. After a few other announcements, he paused and then said, rather gravely, "Now let us worship the living God."

The congregation responded with enthusiasm and intelligence to the scheduled order of worship. Four unison readings—a call to worship, a prayer of confession, a prayer of petition, and an Old Testament reading—were recited with energy. Three hymns and a psalm lining (the latter introduced and led by the choir director as a responsive chant on a melody freely improvised by her) were sung loudly and in tune. Everyone seemed eager to take part. About a fifth of the congregation, too, all volunteers, had designated roles to play in the service. There were four ushers, three lay readers, and over thirty musicians, including the members of the adult and children's choirs, their directors and accompanists, and the high-school boy who played a snare drum to accompany *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. A half dozen had helped with the decorations for the service.

So this was not a religious event that was remote from or alien to those who experienced it. The congregation took an active part, and they did so on what appeared to be their own terms. Their voices were exercised and their laughter encouraged. Their everyday dress was welcomed; even the minister wore street clothes and no visible symbol of office. They addressed God in the vernacular as "you" and not as an archaic "thou." They pronounced "Amen" to rhyme with "say men."

The size and enthusiasm of this congregation suggest that the messages purveyed in the service were conformable to their attitudes. Although few of them could have had the learning and imagination to have anticipated everything that was to be said that day, it must be true that it pleased them in many ways. Let us then turn to the message.

In God We Trust

Certainly patriotism was an obvious theme for the day. Great national events were commemorated, not only July Fourth and the Declaration of Independence but also the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln and the establishment of a godly commonwealth in the New World by the Puritans. A lay reader presented an excerpt from William Bradford's *Of Plimouth Plantation*, on the signing of the Mayflower Compact, and the choir director introduced psalm lining as a practice of colonial American churches. The minister expressed his own patriotism in the opening words of his sermon:

I love America. It's very positive that I can use the pulpit to say that. I think I can do it today without too many people throwing things at me. The 1960s may not have allowed me to do that. I wasn't very brave then.

To live in this land of the free is a priceless gift. I believe it to be a gracious gift from God, something not to be taken lightly but to be cherished, treasured, and sacrificed for. I believe that we live in the best of nations, in a political system that holds a very sane estimate of the nature of man. I say this in complete awareness of our faults and our cracks and our injustices. I know that America can and must improve, but I am convinced that she is the best of all possible nations today.

To a considerable extent, this church service was a palpable celebration of American nationhood. One needed no unusual perception to see that.

God was not, however, reduced to a tribal deity. His transcendence was also repeatedly affirmed. The choir sang a familiar paraphrase of Psalm 100 proclaiming God's international dominion. "All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice." The congregation sang a hymn based on St. Paul's universalism: "In Christ there is no East or West, in Him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." The nation was celebrated but not idolized. "Righteousness exalts a nation," began the Old Testament reading, "but sin is a reproach to any peo-

ple" (Prov. 14:34). A litany petitioned God for deliverance from ethnocentrism:

LEADER: From brassy patriotism and a blind trust in power;

PEOPLE: Deliver us, O God.

LEADER: From divisions among us of class or race; from wealth that will not share, and poverty that feeds on food of bitterness;

PEOPLE: Deliver us, O God.

LEADER: From a lack of concern for other lands and peoples; from narrowness of national purpose; from failure to welcome the peace you promise on earth;

PEOPLE: Deliver us, O God.

The minister in his sermon spoke of God alone as the true object of man's devotion; God, he said, is the divine author and giver of the liberty, peace, and happiness that America has enjoyed.

The freedom and worth of the individual person were extolled, and they were also claimed to be the product of God and of religiously motivated men. Said the local poet, in her contribution to the service,

Independence doesn't come
like a feather
Floating gently on the breeze,
carried by another's will
To be seized
by any local opportunist.
It comes violently,
like the Kingdom of God
Who invades Neanderthalian primitive ego
with love explosive,
Catapulting mind and soul and body
into a thousand jagged pieces
To be put together in a new shape
by the glue of Him
Who speaks words of dynamite.

The choir sang an American folk hymn, which spoke of the personal relationship between the believer and the savior. "What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul!" The sermon traced the principle of the inestimable value of the individual person to roots in the teachings of Socrates and Moses and through its elaboration by Thomas Jefferson.

The minister tried to explicate the meaning of personal freedom for the members of his congregation by using their names and their idiosyncrasies in a format he said he had borrowed from a 1930s essayist:

Freedom is living in Mendocino. [pause.] Amen. [laughter.]

It's a walk along the headlands at dusk to watch the bobbing boat lights in Big River Bay.

It's the right to assemble here this morning to worship God without fear of reprisal. And it's also the right to go up the hill and worship at the Southern Baptist Church or the Roman Catholic Church or any other church that you desire to worship in.

Freedom is our local Citizens' Advisory Planning Board endlessly meeting to develop an orderly plan for our community growth. . . .

Freedom is Baird Ingram and his salty sailors sailing off to save God's whales with love. [laughter.]

It's Mariel Grant and Ezekiel Trout being able to walk barefoot whenever they please.

It's being able to choose between the Good Shepherd School and the Mendocino Elementary School for your children.

It's Larry Redford and Phillippe Ericson arguing creationism versus evolutionary hypotheses in the *Beacon* and the rest of us reading on. . . .

It's Ed and Eleanor Kearney going for a visit to Russia when they want to and it's us staying at home. . . .

It's many things but it's freedom for us and it is God-given and it's good.

Above all, the explicit message of the service was that freedom is one of a host of blessings that have been visited upon Americans in a covenant with God. The conditions of this covenant were declared to be those that Moses had laid down for the children of Israel prior to their entry into Canaan. The Old Testament responsive reading was based on the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy.

So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and fearing him.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills. . . .

And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. . . .

Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."

You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth;

And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other Gods and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish.

Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall

you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.

Time and again throughout the hour-long service, this concept of a fateful contract of the people with God was recalled.

Indeed, if the scriptural text for the day was Moses' farewell speech, the secular text was not the Declaration of Independence but the Mayflower Compact. It was less the achievements of the Founding Fathers than those of the Puritans that were commemorated, and imagery more appropriate to Thanksgiving than to the Fourth of July was repeatedly invoked. The Mayflower Compact was read in its entirety by one of the lay readers, and its phrases were invoked in the sermon: America was settled "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith"; the commonwealth was founded "for our better ordering and preservation"; to this commonwealth the subscribers pledged "all due submission and obedience." The role of religion in the preservation of the conditions for a free society was the theme of the day.

It was to the conditional nature of American freedom that the minister devoted the closing minutes of his sermon. He spoke of the one great visible symbol of American freedom, the Statue of Liberty. "But," he went on, "she only tells half of the story of our freedom."

Someone has suggested, wisely, I believe, that she needs a sister, who will sit on the west coast in the harbor of San Francisco Bay and proclaim the other half of her message. That other half would be a statue of responsibility, one that would proclaim that freedom always demands personal responsibility and restraint. . . .

This brought the minister back to his theology:

The great problem of human liberty is the problem of inward and voluntary control. . . . I believe that the surest guarantee against further government control and outward hindrances upon our way of life is a greater measure of self-imposed restraint.

Listen to these words of Edmund Burke. "The less control there is within, the more there must be from without." Man needs a master—you and I do—if he is not to have a fellow man for a master, with all the harm that comes both to the tyrant and the slave in such a relation. . . . Nothing else in this world is powerful enough to withstand the human ego but God.

Then the minister spoke directly to each individual:

If you wish to be a good American on this day, on this bicentennial Sunday, a good citizen, then you can serve her in no better way than by serving the Lord our God, the Lord of nations, who brought her into being as an answer to the prayers of our pilgrim ancestors.

Our Christianity needs to be very personal at this point. It needs to be lived out within the limited democracy of the church first. But it must also be aware of its responsibility for the nation as well. For we are leaven and light and salt in this nation. . . .

He concluded with a local reference:

Visitors to our little village often remark at how beautiful the skyline is from Chapman Point on Highway One. And the crowning and highest point on that skyline is the steeple of this church. It stands as a symbol of voluntary order in a sometimes very chaotic village. And so must the church be an island of order and sanity and faith from which our community takes its pattern. Let us as Christians strive and work and pray that this church and all churches may be the true leaven of this nation.

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.

Amen.

No other Sunday service at the church that year had such a patriotic theme, and the scriptural text was much more often New than Old Testament. Yet the service and its centerpiece, the sermon, were representative of the religious message promulgated at Mendocino Presbyterian in the mid-1970s. God was thanked and his providence extolled for traditional institutions, above all the family and the church. This conservative message was always presented in an informal, even folksy style, without heavy trappings of churchliness and with manifest attention paid to the diverse lifestyles within the congregation. Repeatedly, man's need for God was preached by the pastor and confessed by members of his congregation. The living God is the maker of our lives, said the pastor, and one often heard testimonies from his flock about what the Lord was doing in their lives.

A wide range of persons in the congregation had developed what they called a personal relationship with the Lord, and they were far less interested in the visitor's denominational background than in whether you "knew the Lord." This church had become a focal point of enthusiastic new Christians of many religious backgrounds—not only Presbyterian but also Lutheran, Anglican, and Baptist; not only Protestant but also Catholic and Orthodox; not only Christian but also Jewish. Their dwelling places ranged from the humble to the opulent:

a spotless loft in what had been a barn; a converted chicken coop fitted with stained-glass windows and overgrown with nasturtiums; tiny cabins hidden among the redwoods; Victorian farm houses and graceful bungalows on the village streets; and split-level palaces on the ocean cliffs. Yet their church was also one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in California, one with a long and proud history.

It is the vitality of this old, small-town church that is the focus of my book. What was the source and the nature of the enthusiastic participation of a heterogeneous group in the affairs of a rather conservative church? What does the answer to that question tell us about American Protestantism? I already knew, when I went to church that morning, that the congregation had grown significantly in recent years. Five years earlier, the last time the Fourth of July had fallen on a Sunday, there were only one-third as many persons in attendance (seventy-eight, to be exact, the number inscribed by the same head usher) as there were this year, and the worshippers represented only sixty percent of the membership at that time. Today, there were two hundred and twenty-three, which was a number equal to 110% of a much-increased membership roll. The membership had grown by half and the attendance rate had almost doubled. What had happened?

Perhaps a score of the day's worshippers had turned out solely for the bicentennial celebration. But two hundred was not an unusual entry on the usher's ledger for 1976. More important was that the bitter war in Vietnam was by 1976 a matter of collective amnesia. Still more significant were the Jesus people who had followed the hippies into rural California. And much of the growth could be attributed to the arrival in town of new permanent residents, drawn by the lure of a small and quaint but cosmopolitan town to live off the rewards of lives of work spent elsewhere. Those I spoke to in the congregation believed that the primary reason for the church's rapid growth was the new pastor, Eric Underwood, who had come to Mendocino in 1973. One hundred of the 203 adult members of the congregation on bicentennial Sunday had joined the church in the three years since his arrival. By 1976, his church had become the fastest-growing Presbyterian church in northern California. How this happened and what it means is the story I plan to tell.