

## A Birthday Letter to America

Mark 9: 33-37

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Dear America,

I am writing this letter to wish you a very happy birthday! It's hard to believe, but it was 240 years ago tomorrow that your great and noble experiment as a nation was launched with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Declaring your independence from the Imperial power of Great Britain, your revolutionary leaders sent shock waves through the rest of the world with those immortal words...

***"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (people) 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."***

If ever the written word was able to capture the power and imagination of an idea, it was precisely here in this unforgettably bold statement—a statement that helped to give birth to a new nation and a timeless idea—the idea that every human being has a fundamental right to be free and equal.

In the 240 years that have come and gone since this declaration, this idea has been memorized by school children and taken to heart by immigrants. It has been engraved on the plaques of monuments and quoted by Presidents...All are created equal and all have unalienable rights—the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

What a beautiful vision! What a timeless hope!

Yet, it soon became apparent that it was a vision and a hope that, in some respects, was more aspirational than actual. For the truth, of course, is that a number of the Declaration's signers owned slaves and a passage that addressed the matter of slavery was deleted from the adopted declaration.

In actual practice, equality and liberty were reserved for those who had lighter skin and happened to be born as a male. Women, in this new nation of ours, were not permitted to vote and their role in government itself was non-existent.

And that it is the way that it would remain for quite some time. There was a discrepancy between the noble ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the actual implementation of those ideals in the everyday life of our country. It was soon evident that some were considered to be "more equal" than others.

In the decades and the centuries that would follow, that discrepancy would be revealed in attitudes toward the Native Americans whose lands would be taken, the immigrants who

were often ridiculed and ostracized, and those who simply lacked the proper pedigree of prosperity.

Today, this discrepancy and resulting disparity continues as the gap between those who **"have"** and those who **"have not"** widens in ways that are unprecedented. To be sure, we still think in terms of "liberty and justice for all," but that is not always the way that it plays out. In recent years, there have been tangible signs of growing unrest, anger and disappointment on the part of those who are feeling disenfranchised and marginalized. The Occupy Wall Street movement gave us a glimpse of this simmering frustration and our recent political primary process has revealed that many are no longer content with "more of the same."

In fact, it would not be inaccurate to suggest that there is, today, another revolution that is unfolding--a revolution unlike that which gave birth to our nation. This revolution is more global than national as it transcends the borders that once neatly defined our provincial perspectives and points of view.

It is no longer enough to think solely in terms of "my country, right or wrong." Instead, we are faced with the challenge of recognizing that we truly a part of a global village and have a responsibility to act accordingly--as citizens of our planet, not just our own nation. Like it or not, our technologies and our economies are bound together in ways that make it abundantly clear that we cannot live in isolation--even if we wanted to.

Given this growing global revolution, there is an inclination on the part of some to return to the way it used to be. They would "make America great again." But I can't help but wonder just what true greatness really looks like in our contemporary world with all of its geographical, environmental and cultural concerns.

Does being great mean the same thing as being number one? Does being great mean that our only concern should be for our own economic or political benefit? Does being great mean that our views and actions must be defined solely by the borders within which we live?

I'm not so sure that this understanding of greatness is helpful in the world as we now know it. In fact, I'm not so sure that our world can survive this understanding as it has now brought us to the precipice overlooking the prospect of international chaos and self-destruction.

True greatness, it seems to me, grows out of a more noble aspiration--indeed, the same aspiration shared by the signers of the Declaration of Independence and their vision of genuine equality, liberty and justice for all...not just for our own, but for all.

It was, of course, Jesus who suggested that true greatness is not to be found by "lording it over others," but, instead, by choosing to be the servant of all. This is, I recognize, a most radical thing to suggest, but it seems to me that any nation that would call itself a Christian nation ought to be willing, at least, to take the teaching of Jesus seriously. Is it possible that we might be willing to define our greatness through our willingness to be a servant of all, or, at least, to work together with other nations for the common good of all?

It was, of course, the Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who toured the newly formed nation of America, trying to determine the essence of her soul. After much travel and extensive observation, he came up with this simple summary: **“America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”**

In this simple assessment, there is a gold mine of both wisdom and warning. The wisdom of this assessment reminds us that it was the goodness of America's desire to be a place liberty and justice for all that earned it the admiration and affirmation of people from around the world. It was the nobility of the thought that this could truly be a place that respected the rights and the dignity of all people that inspired countless millions to make their pilgrimage in order to share in this American experience.

And it is this goodness that I, as an American citizen, am most proud of. It has been and remains, a remarkable gift to the world and to each one of your citizens.

The warning of this message is that, in the midst of all the pressures and challenges that currently characterize life on this fragile planet, we can easily lose sight of the vision of this goodness if we give in to our fears and become self-centered in our policies. If that happens, the words that we dutifully recite from memory may become little more than a hollow reminder of a conviction that we once held but no longer truly believe.

This, of course, is a world far different from the one into which you were born 240 years ago. It was, necessary, at that time, for our founding fathers and mothers to declare their independence from England and the shackles of colonial rule. In our own time and place, it is necessary not only for the sake of our nation, but for the sake of our community of nations, to declare **our inter-dependence on one another**—our need to work in concert with other people of other nations for the greater good of all.

Not only is this a noble and inspiring vision, but it is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid economic, environmental and social destruction of an unparalleled nature. We must find ways to act inter-dependently because there is no going back to the independent world that once was.

My hope and my prayer is that as a people of faith, we can and will choose to live lives that seek the greatness that our ancestors sought, the greatness of pursuing a common vision of the common good, the greatness of respecting and honoring the equality and rights of every individual, the greatness of passionately pursuing liberty and justice for all—not just for some.

The nobility of the vision that brought about your birth 240 years ago, has lost none of its beauty, power or importance. It is still as critical as it ever was—perhaps even more so.

**I pray** that we will have the ability to do more than merely recite the words of that vision by memory.

**I pray** that we will have the conviction to translate these words into a courageous witness that reflects our choice to respect the equality of all people and their rights as human beings.

**I pray** that we will choose the greatness that comes with living inter-dependently, not only respecting, but insisting upon the rights, the dignity and equality of all people—not only those within our borders, but also those who live within the boundaries of our global village. For they too are a part of our family—they too are a part of the family that God has created and loved. Red and yellow, black and white, they are all precious in God's sight.

Let us pray and work for the day when it will be so. Amen.