

MEET DR. WITHERSPOON

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

July 8, 2018; non-lectionary sermon

Psalm 76; John 8:31-36

“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

John 8:36

We’ve all heard the names of the great men associated with the founding of this great country: Washington, Franklin, Adams and Jefferson lead the list. Until three years ago, most of us wouldn’t have included Alexander Hamilton — thinking him a lesser luminary — but a certain Broadway musical has changed all that.

Yet, there is another founding father, whose name has — unfortunately — sunk into obscurity — though I think, deserves a similar rehabilitation. I’d be surprised if anyone ever writes a hip-hop musical about him, but hey, you never know. Stranger things have happened.

If John Witherspoon is known anywhere, it’s here in New Jersey: he was one of our four signers of the Declaration of Independence. He led New Jersey’s delegation to the Continental Congress.

We Presbyterians know John Witherspoon — or at least we ought to — because he was one of our own. He was a Presbyterian minister: the only active minister of any denomination to sign the Declaration of Independence.

This morning I'd like to introduce him to you: because John Witherspoon is someone you truly ought to know about.

It's an unfortunate thing, but sometimes it happens that those who teach American history in public schools try to scrub out any and all mention of religion. The separation of church and state *is* a very important principle of government — and one I happen to believe in, as an American — but that doesn't mean we should ignore the role religion has played, and continues to play, in the life of our nation.

John Witherspoon did not get to Independence Hall on July 4, 1776 independent of his Presbyterian faith. His faith was part of who he was: and his belief in God-given principles of human freedom is what led him, personally, to put his life on the line, and sign the Declaration.

Of all the members of the Continental Congress, John Witherspoon was possibly the one who'd been in America the least amount of time. He'd only come here in 1768, just 8 years before. Prominent American Presbyterians had recruited him in that year to come over from Scotland to head the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. Technically, he wasn't an immigrant — because the American colonies were then part of Great Britain — but he must have seemed that way to some.

Witherspoon was 45 years old when he made that arduous sea-journey, along with his wife, Elizabeth, and their five children. The two of them had had ten children altogether, but only five survived into adulthood — a sad and common-enough story, for that day and age.

His was a brilliant mind. His father, a minister, taught him to read as a very young child. They say he was reading the Bible at age 4. At age 13, he entered the University of Edinburgh. He graduated just after his 16th birthday with a Master's degree, and 4 years later, at the tender age of 20, he was named Doctor of Theology and licensed to preach in the Church of Scotland.

By the time the Princeton board came after him 25 years later, John Witherspoon was well-known as one of the great preachers and theologians of his time.

The first time they asked, he said no. You can understand why. At 45 years of age, he was in the prime of life — perhaps even beyond it, considering the shorter life expectancies of that time. To load wife and children and worldly goods onto a ship, and sail off across the stormy North Atlantic — probably never to return — was more than an adventure. Some would call it foolhardy.

Witherspoon arrived in Princeton with his personal library of 300 books. Those books provided a real boost to the College of New Jersey's one-thousand-

or-so volumes. He found the college in terrible financial shape: he had to start fund-raising immediately. On a fund-raising swing through Virginia, he recruited a young student named James Madison. He'd eventually become President of course, but Madison was also the principal author of the Constitution. He'd learned Presbyterian church government in the lecture hall of Dr. Witherspoon, and he brought the same principles of representative government, and checks and balances, into what would become the United States government.

Madison wasn't the only one of Witherspoon's students to make good. He also taught 37 judges (three of whom would serve on the Supreme Court), 10 Cabinet members, 12 members of the Continental Congress, 28 U.S. Senators and 49 members of the House of Representatives.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. When storm clouds of revolution began to gather, John Witherspoon proved himself an ardent patriot. The battles of Lexington and Concord had recently taken place. The colony of Massachusetts was up in arms. Everybody knew New Jersey — with its large population of Scottish and Scots-Irish people, who had no great love for the English — would not be far behind.

It was during that perilous time — May of 1776 — that John Witherspoon

preached a sermon called “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men.” It was published immediately in pamphlet form, and became an overnight sensation throughout the colonies. Just a month later, New Jersey elected him to the Continental Congress. Two weeks after that, in Independence Hall, John Hancock offered him a quill pen and he added his name to the Declaration of Independence.

The sermon I’ve just mentioned was based on Psalm 76, our Old Testament Lesson for today. Specifically, he based it on verse 10 in the King James version, which goes like this: “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.”

It’s a mighty fine scripture text for revolution. Witherspoon took “the wrath of man” to refer to war (“the wrath of man — *war* — shall praise thee”). In the sermon, he constructs a case for Christians to go to war in pursuit of a righteous cause.

It’s not that Witherspoon was a war-monger by nature. He starts off by emphasizing how terribly destructive war is:

It is shocking to think, since the first murder of Abel by his brother Cain, what havock has been made of man by man in every age. What is it that fills the pages of history, but the wars and contentions of princes and empires?

What’s true of war in general, he says, is even more true of civil war, of the

citizens of one nation squaring off against fellow citizens:

How deeply affecting is it, that those who are the same in complexion, the same in blood, in language, and in religion, should, notwithstanding, butcher one another with unrelenting rage, and glory in the deed? That men should lay waste the fields of their fellow subjects, with whose provision they themselves had been often fed, and consume with devouring fire those houses in which they had often found a hospitable shelter.

If war teaches us anything, says Dr. Witherspoon, it's the depravity of human nature. And that, he points out, highlights the necessity of getting right with God. So, even in the midst of all the revolutionary rhetoric, his sermon includes an evangelistic call to enter into relationship with Jesus Christ:

Can you have a clearer view of the sinfulness of your nature, than when the rod of the oppressor is lifted up, and when you see men putting on the habit of the warrior, and collecting on every hand the weapons of hostility and instruments of death? I do not blame your ardor in preparing for the resolute defence of your temporal rights. But consider I beseech you, the truly infinite importance of the salvation of your souls.

Then comes a forthright call to arms, an exhortation to courage on the battlefield:

...if your cause is just, if your principles are pure, and if your conduct is prudent, you need not fear the multitude of opposing hosts.

It was probably inevitable, Dr. Witherspoon goes on, that America and far-off Great Britain would eventually come to a separation:

There are fixed bounds to every human thing. When the branches of a tree grow very large and weighty, they fall off from the trunk.

The sharpest sword will not pierce when it cannot reach. And there is a certain distance from the seat of government, where an attempt to rule will either produce tyranny and helpless subjection, or provoke resistance and effect a separation.

Witherspoon concludes his sermon by making a strong connection between patriotism and religious faith. To the young men who would soon take up arms in defense of their homeland, he gives this advice:

...remember that your duty to God, to your country, to your families, and to yourselves, is the same.... so in times of difficulty and trial, it is in the man of piety and inward principle, that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier. God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.

It's no wonder, with such words coming from one of America's most prominent pulpits, that the English politician Horace Walpole would rise up in Parliament and complain, "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson." I think we know who he had in mind!

But you won't hear that sort of thing in history class, in most schools — not even here in New Jersey, where we have special cause to claim John Witherspoon as one of our own. You'd think, from some history textbooks, that it was sheer accident that this man happened to be a minister: that serving in the Continental Congress was just a little hobby of his, unrelated to his religious vocation!

No, for Witherspoon, personal faith and the search for political justice were intimately connected. In a pamphlet he co-wrote with several others a year before that sermon, that the General Synod circulated to all Presbyterian churches, Dr. Witherspoon makes that perfectly clear. Let me read a small section from that pamphlet, entitled “A Pastoral Letter, Written in Perilous Times.” It speaks to the need for those who engage in the struggle for independence to strengthen their personal faith:

The Synod cannot help thinking that this is a proper time for pressing all of every rank, seriously to consider the things that belong to their eternal peace. Hostilities, long feared, have now taken place; the sword has been drawn in one province, and the whole continent, with hardly any exception, seem determined to defend their rights by force of arms. If, at the same time, the British ministry shall continue to enforce their claims by violence, a lasting and bloody contest must be expected. Surely, then, it becomes those who have taken up arms, and profess a willingness to hazard their lives in the cause of liberty, to be prepared for death, which to many must be certain, and to every one is a possible or probable event.

Witherspoon and his co-authors go on:

...to exhort, especially the young and vigorous, by assuring them that there is no soldier so undaunted as the pious man, no army so formidable as those who are superior to the fear of death.

No doubt, that pamphlet was circulated right here in Lamington. Some of the Revolutionary War veterans who are buried in our cemetery would have been inspired by those words.

It's ironic — and rather sad — that John and Elizabeth Witherspoon would have personal reason to reflect on those words as well. A year after the Declaration of Independence, one of their own sons would be killed, fighting in the Continental

Army at the Battle of Germantown.

Clearly, the Witherspoons would agree with this line from today's Gospel lesson: John 8, verse 32, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." He said in that sermon I cited earlier — that recruitment pitch for the Continental Army — that what the new nation needed was not only men who could load and fire a musket, but those who had submitted their lives to a power greater than themselves. Their nation needed men who valued God's truth: not the lies the British oligarchy had been telling them, raking in the wealth of the New World and giving back so little in return. They witnessed that sort of truth-telling in their most-admired leader, George Washington — we've all heard that fable of young George chopping down the cherry tree, and saying to his father afterwards, "I *cannot* tell a lie." Historians are right to question whether or not that incident is anything more than legend, but it really doesn't matter: the important thing is that — in telling and retelling that story about Washington — the people of this land saw truth-telling as his most distinctive and important virtue.

The Declaration of Independence is built on certain truths that are self-evident: "that all men 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.” It would take a century for our young nation to begin affirming that equality applies to people of every race, and a century and a half for us to understand that it applies to woman as well as men — and those struggles for justice are still not ended. From time to time, people may come along who desire to reverse those gains, but we do well to resist them. John Witherspoon knew — and we know also, as fellow Christians who are the heirs of his tradition — that God’s truth is a power that cannot be overcome by the mightiest of armies: and that, in the end, it will make us free.

Our hymn, “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” is set to a tune that was well-known to John Witherspoon and his contemporaries. It was — and still is — the British national anthem, “God Save the King” (or Queen, as is the case today). The words we sing to this tune are different, although they still do celebrate a monarchy. It’s not the monarchy of George III, but that of a far greater ruler: “Long may our land be bright with freedom’s holy light; protect us by thy might, great *God* our King.”

John Witherspoon died in 1794 — 37 years before these words were written — but I’m quite sure, given the chance, he would have sung them with gusto. Let us do the same, as we make this hymn our closing prayer.

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