

ABUNDANT RESPONSIBILITY

I just spent the last week in Beaumont, Texas, with members of our high school youth group. Beaumont, as you may know, is in the eastern part of Texas, about twenty-five miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico and very near the Louisiana border. It was right in the path of Hurricane Rita last year, and as a result, has needed some extra help rebuilding. That's why we were there—working with the local Habitat for Humanity chapter. They are constructing 29 new houses as part of their Rita Recovery program.

I'd never been to Texas before, aside from flying in and out of Dallas/Forth Worth Airport once or twice. And while you always hear about what a big state it is, I guess it never really registered with me. On the worksite last week there was also another youth group. They came from McAllen, Texas, near Brownsville—some eight hours away! Texas is some 900 miles from top to bottom, and 800 miles wide. There are parts of it that are desert, some areas are like the tropics, some parts are rich savannahs which stretch for endlessly flat mile after mile after mile. There are oil wells and shrimp boats and cattle and cowboys and skyscrapers touching the heavens.

Katherine Lee Bates, the writer of our first hymn, “America the Beautiful”, was similarly struck, not just by Texas, but by the rich diversity and abundance of our entire country. In 1893 she was lecturing at a school in Colorado Springs. One morning she traveled to the top of Pikes Peak. As the sun rose in the East she was entranced by, as she later noted, “the expanse of the mountain ranges and the sea-like sweep of the plains.” (Quoted by Albert Ronander in *Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal*, 338) Shortly after that she wrote the patriotic song that some feel should be our national anthem.

Set to Samuel Ward's tune “Materna” it is a thrilling piece of music. It stirs the soul and swells the heart with national pride as we sing of “spacious skies,” “amber waves of grain,” “purple mountains,” and “fruited plains.” Our nation is a grand and wondrous place! So richly, richly blessed! And Bates' song captures that so well.

But her song also challenges us. It challenges us to be a land devoted to equal opportunity for all. It challenges us to see that all have a share in the abundance that comes pouring forth from our “alabaster cities” as well as the farmlands. And in both the first and last stanzas, we are urged to “crown [our] good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”

Today those of us who are sensitive to language might choose a word other than brotherhood, one more gender inclusive, but the sentiment remains unchanged. What Bates was saying still challenges us over one-hundred years later.

America, she said then and says now, you have been so richly blessed. You have been given so much. You are a land of great wealth, some earned, and some just by the grace of being where you are. But listen well, she is saying, with abundant blessing comes abundant responsibility. For you are called to share what you have with one another and, ultimately, with the world. And while the song itself seems U. S. specific, Bates was a strong promoter of the League of Nations, and efforts to create a just and equitable world as well as nation.

Yes, America, you have abundant blessings, she seems to be saying, but you also have abundant responsibility.

The message conveyed in Bate's lyrics is not unlike that conveyed in our passage from Second Corinthians.

St. Paul had founded the church in Corinth in the early fifties. He spent more time there than in any other city he evangelized.

Corinth was a very cosmopolitan place and folks came and settled there from all over the ancient world. And, not unlike those of us who live here in lower Fairfield County, they brought with them a plethora of resources. And the commercial enterprises of the city generated many more.

Not all of the members of the church in Corinth were well-off, in fact, many were not. Some were slaves and very poor. But collectively, they were doing alright. In fact, Paul speaks of their situation as one of abundance.

The church in Jerusalem, on the other hand, was under siege. It was persecuted and in need of financial assistance. So Paul was making the rounds, writing or visiting the churches he had founded, taking up a collection for Jerusalem. It was, if you will, a first century relief effort.

The church in Macedonia had responded very generously, despite the fact that they were a poor church themselves. "They gave offerings," writes Paul, "of whatever they could—far more than they could afford—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief [effort]" (*The Message*, 2104) They had heard of their neighbors in need, and they stepped up to the challenge.

The Corinthians, though, had been dragging their feet. A year earlier they had offered to assist with the collection. Who knows, maybe they'd had an every member canvass and filled out papyrus pledge cards. But months had passed and nothing was happening. No funds were forthcoming.

So Paul writes to urge them on. “As you excel in everything,” he says, “excel also in this generous undertaking It is appropriate for you who began last year [to] . . . finish doing it.” (8:7)

And he then offers a compelling reason. Not only is it the loving thing to do, it is also fair. “It is a question of fair balance,” he says, “between your present abundance and their need” (8:14)

Friends, those of us who live here in the United States, one of the richest nations on earth, especially those of us here in Connecticut, the richest state in the union, need to hear these words of Paul as being personally addressed to each one of us. As American Christians, we need to ask, what is fair? What is the fair balance between our abundance, and the needs of millions both here and abroad?

I don’t normally watch the evening news, but recently I caught a segment on CBS that really made an impression on me. It was about the ongoing situation in Darfur, where millions of thousands go hungry every day, and many, many innocent persons are slaughtered in a never-ending civil war.

The news segment featured an American woman named Beth Riley, who is involved in relief and advocacy efforts on behalf of the Sudanese in Darfur.

At one point the interviewer asked her: “Are you an activist?”

“Well,” she responded, “I’ve been *labeled* an activist.”

“So,” said the interviewer, “what word would you use instead?”

Riley paused. Finally she answered, “Neighbor. I’d use neighbor.” (CBS Evening News, 6-16-06)

That, sisters and brothers, is who we are called to be as Christians. We are called to be neighbors. After all, while Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God, he also says the second is to love neighbor as self.

And while that is our calling as Christians, I would suggest it is also the challenge for all Americans. Our very abundance as a nation challenges us to be good neighbors. Good neighbors to one another and good neighbors to others around the globe. And that means being willing to share the traditional cup of sugar. That means being willing to find ways to use our resources to benefit all human beings, not just those of us who happen to be in the right place at the right time.

Earlier in our history the United States had a foreign relations doctrine known as the Good Neighbor Policy. While the particulars on that piece of international diplomacy may be quite debatable, the concept itself should be foundational to our notion of being Americans: we are to be good neighbors. Locally, nationally and

globally as well. And good neighbors are willing to help when and where they are needed.

Not all of us can be Beth Rileys and work in distant lands. I am reminded of a comic strip I once saw.

An elderly gentleman is sitting on a park bench. He has a paper bag next to him, and in throwing breadcrumbs on the ground.

A young long-haired man sits down next to him.

“What are you doing, man?”

“Feeding the squirrels.”

“That’s perfectly good bread,” says the young fellow, “Don’t you know there are people starving in Africa?”

“I’m sorry,” says the old timer, “But I can’t throw that far.” (*Pickles*, 7-2-95)

No, not all of us can throw that far, not all of us can reach across the seas. Some of us can’t even go to Texas. But all of us can be good neighbors. All of us can be like those Macedonians who “gave according to their means—even beyond their means.” (8:) All of us can work for a fair balance in our towns, in our nation, in the world.

While we were in Texas I got a phone call from my best friend Jerry Fritz. Jerry is a pastor in Massachusetts, and he is on sabbatical this summer. He’s spending most of his time riding his bike from Nebraska to Martha’s Vineyard.

Halfway across Iowa, Jerry and a friend who’s riding with him, stopped for a rest, way out in the sticks. All around them, for miles and miles, wheat fields stretched out before their eyes. There was a slight breeze rustling across the tall brown grasses. Above them the azure blue sky was flecked by a few puffs of white cloud. Jerry and his friend both took out their cameras to snap a picture of the lovely rural scene when suddenly and simultaneously, they both started to sing: “O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain . . .” And once again, the beauty and abundance of our great land had made a mark—had inspired its citizens.

But what inspires me about the story is not so much the amber wheatfields and the clear blue sky, but rather the reason Jerry and his friend were there in the first place.

You see, they aren’t just out for a very long joy ride. Rather, they are being good neighbors. They are raising money for Habitat for Humanity. Hundreds and hundreds of dollars—thousands, actually. They are using their own resources of

time and energy to leverage even more resources to help build homes for fellow Americans who have so much less.

You see, in the end, as Christians it doesn't matter if we are in Texas or Darfur, Macedonia or Iowa, Corinth or even Connecticut. It doesn't matter if we are teenagers on a mission trip, or a sixty-three-year old grandfather going cross country or a young mother devoting time to Darfur. For no matter where we go, no matter our station in life, we are called to be good neighbors. We are called to give according to our means, which for most of us in this blessed land are very great.

This Fourth of July, as we ponder our abundant blessings as Americans, let us not fail to remember our abundant responsibilities as well. Our responsibility to work for a just and fair world.

God *has* blessed America. The question on this special weekend, and on every day, is how will we use that blessing?

**Amen
John H. Danner**