

Sermon Reflections July 1, 2018

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Focus Independence Day w/ an American history lesson

I offer the following story to you as an historical meditation on where we have been as a country, the mistakes we have made, and a slice of our hard-won triumphs. On September 16, 1920 Wall Street was rocked by a horse drawn wagon full of explosives. It was the largest act of domestic terrorism in the United States to that point. Its aftermath would flow into McCarthyism / Red Scares; into the 1980's cold war; and even echoed into the Obama and now Trump administrations.

### Wall Street attack

The Wall Street bombing of 1920 occurred at 12:01pm on September 16<sup>th</sup> in New York City. The blast killed dozens of people immediately, and hundreds were seriously injured. A horse-drawn wagon passed by lunchtime crowds on Wall Street and stopped by the headquarters of the J.P. Morgan bank. A timer set off a detonation beneath 100 pounds of cast-iron weights. The fatalities were mostly young people who worked as messengers, stenographers, clerks, and brokers.

### Reaction

Crews cleaned up the area overnight to allow for normal business operations the next day, but in doing so they destroyed physical evidence that might have helped police investigators solve the crime. To my mind, this created a perfect flash point for demonizing anyone labeled as radical opponents of capitalism, such as Bolsheviks, anarchists, communists, or militant socialists. A few years earlier, the 1917 Espionage Act was passed. This proved to be the perfect means to give the government broad power to sweep up perceived and real enemies of the US.

Investigators focused on radical groups opposed to U.S. financial and governmental institutions. The Washington Post called the 1920 bombing an "act of war." The Sons of the American Revolution moved a patriotic rally to celebrate Constitution Day at exactly the same intersection as the bombing. Thousands marched in defiance of the previous day's attack.

The bombing stimulated renewed efforts by police and federal investigators to track the activities and movements of identified radicals. The New York City Police Department also pushed to form a special police to monitor radical elements in New York City. The 1917 Espionage Act continued to help justify the growing dragnet. During The Harding administration (1921-1923) officials evaluated the Soviets as possible masterminds of the Wall Street bombing and then called out the Communist Party USA.

By 1944, the FBI revisited the case and concluded that Italian anarchists were likely behind the plot—the group had conducted a series of bombings across the United States in 1919, which fueled the nation's first Red Scare. Today, 23 Wall Street still bears the scars from the shrapnel that blasted into it 98 years ago with no plaque commemorating the event. These bomb marks are the only on-site hint of the attack.

### Why the history lesson?

2018 *is* 1920. Fear still smells the same. We still need some "fear anti-venom." It's not just ISIS or white nationalists - each of us struggles to be a servant of the Lord in the face of all that we are afraid of. It's an ongoing struggle, but we have a patriotic obligation to remember '**whose**' **we are** so that we are able to offer real freedom for the captive, the broken hearted, and those huddled masses.

### Today

In my opinion, when reporters at the Washington Post (2018) are getting blanket subpoenas for their sources, we are not being American. At the same time, if we long for a better past administration, we also miss the point. **In 2015, before our current administration**, we ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in press freedom throughout the world. The Obama administration dredged up the 1917 Espionage Act (remember - 3 years before the Wall Street bombing). This act was used to attack whistle blowers. From 2009 to 2017, we jailed more people for talking to the press than *all other US administrations in history, combined*. We have been on a too long trajectory of undercutting and/or ignoring our American ideals. I hope this is an incarceration record that we won't break in the current administration. We can't sit back and hope the political machinery will take care of itself. Let's make America amazing by not letting fear lead. Let's lead with generosity of spirit and time. Our America ahead, I pray, will lift up the ancient values of Deuteronomy that I preach on today.

*The Lord your God is God of Gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God; God alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by God's name you shall swear. God is your praise... who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.*

America is called to create liberty for the captive, walk humbly before God. Our highest is to love our enemies, welcome the stranger, and practice kindness. He is not wrapped in the flag, but my Jesus offers himself to this country and to all people. Jesus' love looks red in his generous offering of his life for the whole world. Jesus' love looks white for the embodiment of holiness. Jesus' love looks blue in justice for all.

Happy July 4<sup>th</sup>, don't give up or forget. PT