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Discourse Delivered Before The Congregational Society

George Palmer Tyler

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DISCOURSE.
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DELIVERED BEFORE

The Congregational Society,

AT

BRATTLEBOROUGH, VT.

On Thanksgiving Day, ~~November~~ 4, 1862,

BY

REV. GEORGE PALMER TYLER,

PASTOR OF THE PARISH.

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DISCOURSE.

MATTHEW IV. 16. THE PEOPLE WHICH SAT IN DARKNESS
SAW GREAT LIGHT.

ONE great charm of our Thanksgiving Day is that it is not a creature of the Written Law, but of the unwritten law of public sentiment. The law does not command, but public sentiment requires it. No governor of a loyal State would venture to refuse its appointment.

A thanksgiving day should be a day of rejoicing before God ; in bringing to remembrance his kind acts in our behalf ; in making mention of his goodness, and ascribing to him the praise due for all which makes our lives pleasant. It is doing what the sweet Psalmist of Israel so much desired men to do : “ O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, for his wonderful works to the children of men.”

The causes for thanksgiving are so numerous, that one who attempts to rehearse them is embarrassed by their very multitude.

In his proclamation, our Governor invites us to give thanks “ for the fruitfulness of the year ; for the plenty which everywhere abounds ; for the prosper-

ity of our material pursuits and interests ; for the general prevalence of health ; for our comfortable homes ; for the endearment and treasures of domestic life ; for the pleasures and advantages of good neighborhood and of intelligent and well-ordered society ; for our institutions of education, and of benevolence and religion ; for freedom from the desolations of war within our own territory ; for the fervent patriotism, nationality of sentiment, and unity of purpose and effort which have characterized the people of our State, leading thousands of its citizens to go forth voluntarily and cheerfully to fight the battles of the Republic, and mothers and daughters to give up to country the dearest objects of their affections ; for the devotion to country so generally manifested by the loyal people of the Union ; for the good order, the steadiness and faithfulness of purpose, and obedience to authority and to law, which have universally prevailed, and been distinctive and striking features in the character and conduct of the free society of the loyal States amidst the perturbations and trials of the present war, and under a government so mild in its restraints as scarcely to be felt by the governed."

Every heart must feel that each specification thus made claims thanks to Him whose gift it is.

But the very love of country of which the Governor speaks, the patriotism which has character-

ized the people, the desolations of war in other sections, the demands it has made and yet makes for money and men, keep this great struggle ever before our minds in the midst of our festivities.

While, therefore, we give thanks from truly grateful hearts for all those things of which mention has been made, while as yet a degree of uncertainty overhangs some of the issues of this war, taking things as they now appear, it seems to me, that it may add to the depth of our thanksgiving to reflect upon the *good* which is apparently springing up out of this great struggle.

You are aware of the original application of the text announced: The people which sat in darkness, by the merciful interposition of God, were caused to see great light, deliverance from evil, salvation. *It is not the only time that God has brought light out of darkness, good out of evil.* This is done *now*.

Before I proceed to state what the good consists of, it is necessary to say a few words in regard to the desirableness of nationality. The founders of our government met, as they declared, for the purpose of establishing a more perfect union. Their aim was nationality. They had felt the evils of the slight tie which bound the States together. They sought to produce a nation out of the disconnected elements at their hand. They did this because all history and experience taught them that

nationality was the prime necessity for the greatest development of strength and prosperity at home, and respect abroad. They did much toward creating a nationality. The elements of weakness which they suffered to remain affect us now. But whatever tends to strengthen the nationality of a people, is a good to that people. It is not enough that individuals or sections should be for a time prosperous and happy for their permanent good; the nation of which they are a part must be firmly established. The nation must not only possess the elements of power, but have them at its command. The people and the nation are not precisely the same. The people are multitudinous, having varied interests; the nation is a unit, and its interests a unit. The people may be rich, and manage their private affairs prosperously; the nation may be poor, and unable to defend itself from internal and external foes, and when a nation is assailed, all the interests of the people suffer.

I proceed, therefore, to show the cause we have for thankfulness from the effect of this war to establish our nationality.

I. *It is making us rich, as a nation.*

Some one may meet this statement with the remark that it is a singular way to enrich a nation by running it into debt six, seven, eight hundred

millions. Look at the facts. The nation represented by the federal government has spent this money. The people will pay the debt, and lay up money while they are doing it; and perhaps learn some economy. It will not hurt them. Now how will it effect the nation? It will enrich it in this way; a portion of this money will be absolutely burned up in powder, or destroyed in other material of war, or consumed by the commissariat. The pay of the soldiers cannot be said to be a loss, but it does not enrich the nation. Deducting all this, the nation finds itself greatly enriched by the remainder. When the war begun, our people were rich, our nation poor, — poor in muskets, poor in cannon, poor in navy, poor in army, in hospitals, in arsenals, in everything which goes to constitute a rich nation. It did not own even the raw material out of which these things could be made. The material was all in the hands of the people, and was doled out with a very niggard hand by the representatives of the people. The nation could get but little to maintain its position among nations. But how is it now? The war furnished a sufficient motive, and the people gave the money to enrich the nation, and it this hour owns in the single item of a navy, enough to make it rich. It is rich also in all other munitions so needful to preserve nationality, in this warring,

turbulent world. Every patriot should be grateful for this desirable change. But this point will appear more plainly, as we consider another.

II. *This war is making us strong as a nation.*

It has developed, and put into the nation's possession a large amount of force of various kinds. The genius of Ericsson alone has been fostered, until it has placed the nation on a par with the greatest naval powers. It has immeasurably increased our means of coast defences, our most assailable point. It has taught us much of the art of war. It has augmented many fold our regular army. In view of those other great powers of the Old World, which are accustomed to estimate the strength of nations, notwithstanding the present rebellion, the strength of this nation must appear vastly augmented. But besides all this material increase of strength, in all the loyal States, and among all the loyal in the seceded States, the value of nationality above particular and local state interest has so grown and been confirmed as to add a tower of strength to the nation. Who can doubt as the liability to insult and interference by other nations, has appeared? Who can doubt the value of being a strong nation, to the people of it? It is a great good for which we have cause for sincere thankfulness.

III. *This war is making us wiser, as a nation.*

The people have always possessed a large share of intelligence. In most respects they have managed their affairs well. But they have not been wise respecting the essentials of nationality. They have flattered themselves that the days of violence were over. Time spent in military discipline was counted lost. Money expended for this end was worse than wasted. Many advocated the breaking up of our military schools. Whatever added material force to the nation was granted only in the smallest possible measure. Men showed what they called patriotism, and desire for the interests of the people, by opposing everything of the kind. We labored under the mistake that a great and prosperous people, excelling in the arts of peace, was *ipso facto*, a great and prosperous nation.

This would not have been a mistake, but a blessed reality, if men everywhere would do as they would be done by. But while we have not fallen on any such happy time, to act as if we had, was to peril everything. This war has made us wiser. We understand better what is essential to nationality. And I do not see how anything short of just such a war as this, would have availed to wake us up to the requirements of the times. Massachusetts owes the enviable position as foremost in defence of the national capital, not to the wisdom of the people,

so much as to the persistent efforts and foresight of a few men who felt the force of Washington's maxim,—“In peace prepare for war.”

It is not improbable that the wisdom acquired in this war will lead to such action, such preparation for war, as will be the most effectual peace measure possible. For this hard-gained wisdom, we may be thankful.

IV. *This war is making us pure, as a nation.*

By this I do not claim that it is augmenting the piety of individuals. A nation is a unit. It has its birthday. Its growth to manhood. It may have its time of decline and death. It has its own virtues and its own sins. As a nation has no hereafter, God looks upon it as an individual; reproofs, rebukes, exhorts, approves, blesses or punishes it here in this world.

This nation had, in its inception, on its birthday, the sin of slavery. It was its original sin. Like all sin, its tendency was to increase and perpetuate itself. It permeated all the government. It infected every function of the government.

The trail of the serpent was over all. It was over the seat of our national government. A group of our Northern representatives, in John Quincy Adams's Presidency, were standing by the gates of the capitol, when a stalwart black, who had just

been sold in the slave-market, to go South, passed by, and lifted up his manacled hands, and shook his chains, and sung in a clear, loud voice,

“Hail Columbia, happy land.”

The gentlemen may have blushed. They could *do* nothing. I don't mean to speak of the evils of slavery. It is enough to say it prevented this nation from being just. The South is demanding of Europe recognition of its independence as if it were its right. The blacks of Saint Domingo, who won their independence so long ago as the first Napoleon's time, could never obtain recognition from this government until President Lincoln's day. Slavery made cotton and sugar. We wanted them. We kept up slave-markets in Washington. We passed the Fugitive Slave Law. We winked at the slave-trade. We kept up an expensive fleet on the coast of Africa, and would not let any cruiser of another nation search a ship sailing under our flag. We took no steps to hinder slave-ships from fitting out in northern ports. We winked at filibustering expeditions. We took Texas away from Mexico. We did a great many unjust things. By we, I mean the nation. Individuals and even States protested, but in vain. The nation tried to make a slave State of Kansas, but the people rescued her. Those were Northern people. Now I say this war

is making this nation purer. The Fugitive Slave Law is a dead letter. There is no slavery at the seat of the national government. We have conceded the right of search on the African coast. We have hung one or two slave-traders. We have broken up the outfitting business in New York and elsewhere. We are growing just to the black slaves ; we are giving them freedom and wages. The nation is putting itself right before God ; it will do it completely if the war only lasts until the first of January. Now can any man say there is no cause why we should give thanks for some good springing out of this war — the great good of a national purification from our original sin before God ? I think not.

V. *This war is making us safe, as a nation.*

We were not safe before this war. This spirit of rebellion has been nurtured for thirty years or more. These rebels might have been far wiser than they have been. Suppose their plan had been first to embroil us with England, as they did with Mexico, and then made terms of coalition with her, while as a nation we were so poor and weak in every arm of national defence. They might easily have done it. Then where had been our nearly defenceless national capitol ? But irrespective of that, although no nation could have conquered us, we

now know, from the terror felt in our large seaboard cities of a visit from some Merrimac or other iron-clad, how exposed we were to sudden assault and destruction of property along our extended coasts. We did not feel our peril; but it was real. This war has changed all that. It has done much to render this nation safe. It is a great good, and should deepen our thankfulness this day.

VI. *This war is augmenting our moral power, as a nation.*

By moral power, I mean here the force with which we speak as a nation to other nations. We have looked at ourselves complacently as a great Republic. We have not candidly looked at ourselves from the stand-point of the great powerful nationalities of the Old World. They are monarchies; how do republics appear to them? That must be considered when estimating our moral power?

“O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An’ foolish notion.”

It must be confessed that republics have not attained to much moral force in the world. That of Greece succumbed to a monarchy; that of Rome to the imperial autocracy. The French Republic showed mighty energy; but where is it? France is

ruled by a despot. Little Switzerland is certainly respectable in her mountain fastnesses ; but her safety is rather in the mutual jealousies of surrounding monarchies. Her moral power is scarcely felt. Of the republic of Mexico, Daniel Webster justly said, " It was one of the most wretchedly governed nations on the face of the earth." In the great continent further south, there is only one crowned head, — the Emperor of Brazil. The other powers are republics ; and I believe it may be truly said, Brazil only in that vast continent can speak with any moral power among the nations of the earth, and Brazil is nearly a despotism. In view of these facts, it is not strange that the nations educated in monarchical ideas should look on this Republic as possessing the same inherent weakness, or seeds of dissolution to spring up and bear fruit in due time, unable to cope with great difficulties, unwilling to be taxed, that time sure to come, whenever bad or ambitious men, or conflicting interests, should furnish the opportunity. But this war has shown that two causes have been at work to strengthen the foundations of this Republic and render it a notable exception to all the rest. The first is common school education, which has made us universally a reading and thinking people, so that the masses know what is best for themselves. And secondly, religion, as universally dif-

fused among the people, creating a conscientious respect for established law. By it God is made to dwell among the people. What is right before him, what is just, what is obligatory on man towards his fellow-man, insensibly, perhaps, but really influences all legislation.

Now this war has already shown, it is showing, and will yet show more clearly, that this Republic rests on a surer foundation than any other, even than any monarchy of them all. In showing itself competent to resist the evils of this great rebellion unmoved, but as a nation making those great gains of which we have spoken in its hour of trial, it will come forth and stand head and shoulders above the nations as Saul among the people, and its voice will be potent when it speaks for human freedom in the earth, for right, for justice, for mercy, for humanity.

The Emperor of France, the ruling classes of England, see these results even more clearly than we do, for with them war is a familiar thing, and they have long been accustomed to calculate the forces of nations. They see our nationality looming up grandly, and desire to check the progress, but do not dare. Is not this, I ask, solid reason why thanks are due to God, to-day?

But, my hearers, as the great results we have contemplated have flowed from the patriotism of

the people, showing itself in unity of purpose, self-sacrifice, and tireless activity, so for their perfect confirmation, the war must be conducted with unflagging zeal, without undue impatience, or murmuring. We must not be tired of it, nor think little is done. We have drawn inspiration from the deeds of our fathers. We are now making a grander history for our children. We do not prophesy, but looking upon the results already secured, for the conformation of our nationality, and presuming that the people will be true to themselves. We see this day, in this war, good reasons for hearty thanksgiving to the great Disposer of Events.

And now let me say, in closing this discourse, let not fears for the future mar your thanksgivings, nor your felicity to-day. If you have husbands, sons, friends in the war, they have gone to a noble and necessary task, and one, I verily believe, on which we may as hopefully ask the blessing of God, as on any human enterprise. Life is uncertain with us all. Its issues are in his hands, and with him it brings repose of heart, cheerfully to leave them.

I sincerely believe we have as much cause to keep a heartfelt thanksgiving before God, to-day, as on any former occasion, and far more, as the people of to-day are made the instruments for accomplishing greater and more beneficent results.