

It's A Wonderful World

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This is a recycled speech, or rather, the main part of it is recycled. I first made these remarks at church, four years ago, next Sunday. It will help to understand what I'm saying if you take yourselves back to that time, those uncertain days following the events of September 11, 2001. Take a moment to reflect on what it was like for you at that time.

I was in Orlando on 9/11 attending a business meeting. After the events of that day, I waited around for a couple of days hoping for a flight home. Then, I gave up, rented a car, and headed West on I-10. I spent the night in Pensacola. The next day, I found myself passing through Louisiana on a route just North of New Orleans. But when I came to the southbound turnoff, something in me told me not to bypass the Big Easy. Maybe I needed to make sure that they were still serving beignets and coffee at the Café du Monde, that people were still sucking down oysters at Desire, and that the Mississippi still cradled the Crescent City in her arms. I took the Basin Street exit off I-10 and headed down Conti St. through the French Quarter. It was, like it has always been, full of tourists, palmists, horse-drawn carriages, and drunks. I parked in a lot near the river. I made sure that the Café du Monde was still doing business. I fortified myself with an oyster Po' Boy at Desire. I walked back to the river and climbed the levee, over to a pier where the stern-wheeler Natchez was about to take on a load of tourists. An old black guy with a trumpet was trying to make a living keeping the passengers entertained as they waited to board. I sat down on a bench beside another guy putting the finishing touches on a model of a jet airplane made entirely out of Budweiser beer cans. I listened to the trumpet player belt out *It's a Wonderful World*. I was reminded that it was indeed a wonderful world, in spite of all that had happened that week. I dropped a couple of bucks in his tip box, and he started to play again. I've forgotten what. As I was walking away, I heard the most amazing whistle coming from the Natchez. After a few notes, I realized that I was listening to the loudest, if not the largest steam calliope in the world. I stood and watched the traffic on the river as the calliope went through a couple of George M. Cohan tunes: *Grand Old Flag* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. After a run at *St. Louis Blues*, the calliope fell silent for a moment or two. Then it swung into the song we heard so much back then, *God Bless America*. The rendition was everything you could expect from the loudest, if not the largest, steam calliope in the world. When I headed West once again, I knew that my detour to the delta was not a mistake.

You can imagine that I have, since that time, felt something of a debt to New Orleans. All of us, I suppose, feel debts to the places that have touched our souls. Now, for me and New Orleans things are different. For all that remains to accept payment are a

memory and a dream. I'm doing what I can right now to sustain the memory, and I'll do what I can to make the dream come true. The people of New Orleans were there for me when I needed them. And now, I'm here for them. I want it to be that wherever they wind up, it will be in a place with beignets and oysters and someone to play *It's a Wonderful World*.