

July 2, 2017

A Service of Lessons & Hymns for Our Nation

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The readings for this service are printed at the end of this sermon

Setting Our Burdens Down – As Christians and Americans

A few weeks ago in this space, I spoke of my mother and her finding a home in a new church. And I said the reason she left her previous church was another story for a later time. Well, on this Sunday, the Sunday before the 4th of July, I thought it would be a good time to tell it. She was attending the large, downtown Episcopal Church with its tasteful liturgy and good preaching. But then September 11th happened. And on the Sunday following September 11th and for many Sundays following, this nice church in Greensboro processed the American flag. And she was done. Out of there.

For her, using the national flag in church in response to an attack on Americans was a kind of doubling down on a particular identity that doesn't matter that much to Jesus. The reaction of so many in the face of tragedy was to find our common identity in our nationality. That contradicted her belief that we find our identity in God and in God's love for all of us, regardless of nationality.

My mother is a kind of Anabaptist Episcopalian hybrid. She spent a lot of time with Quakers in her activist days and she acquired an abhorrence to the overt suggestion of state in her church or church in her state.

She is in good company. Another Anabaptist Episcopalian is renowned theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Dr. Hauerwas would ask his students, "where is the gun in the church?"

Where is the gun?" And then he'd point to the American flag, which is displayed in most American churches. "There is the gun."¹

He has a point. The American flag is a multivalent symbol, but surely it does symbolize American power, American military might. We remain America and Americans because of force. That's why we're always supposed to thank the troops, right? The Hauerwas quote and the fact that I spent my first 18 years with my mother has always made me a little jumpy around the American flag, as if it might really be a gun or as if I might catch a bout of fascism through proximity.

But since I have been hanging out with Episcopalians all my life I've noticed that Episcopalians and Anglicans for that matter tend to have a more laid back view of our dual identity as citizens of the United States and citizens in the Kingdom of God. The borders are porous. There is a kind of "bloom where you're planted" quality to Anglican theology. Our emphasis on the incarnation makes the everyday stuff of our lives sacred in some way and therefore it's not so scary to let the culture conform us to it. Our faithfulness to tradition and scripture keeps us steady (so we hope) in a rapidly changing world, but it's ok if we change in some ways along with it. From this perspective, there is no particular problem with the flag in the church because it is one symbol among many; it is part of our identity (I mean, why try to deny it?), but not all of our identity.

These days, however, our identity as Americans is complicated. There are many Americas and they are in tension with one another. There is black America and there is white

¹ This anecdote comes from a friend who attended Duke Divinity School. It's a secondhand story, but everything I know about Dr. Hauerwas leads me to trust that it is true.

America; there is rich American and there is poor America; there is rural American and there is urban America; there is Democratic America and there is Republican America. It used to be that in the Episcopal Church you would find both conservative Americans and liberal Americans. Now, the Episcopal Church looks more or less like the Democratic Party (with several exceptions of course).

But I wonder if this really is new or if the fiction of our unity is failing us. Even after the events of September 11th our collective sense of national unity was short lived and we fell into camps of those with us or against us, depending on who the “us” was. The unity that developed after the Civil War, I am learning, was a unity between a white south and a white north that came at the expense of black safety and inclusion in the benefits of American citizenship.

Recognizing the truth of the complexities of America – that manifest destiny came through violent conquest, that the New Deal was not any kind of a deal for some, that the burden of fighting the wars of this country falls predominantly on the shoulders of the poor, that the American dream is purposely out of reach for so many – recognizing this truth does not have to result in a denial and a disgust for our country.

Again and again, and in no easy line of progression, we are reminded of who and what we could be as a people. And though the voices we heard this morning all come from places of some privilege, they also speak for those on the margins: a housewife well over a hundred years before women would even get the vote; a native American defiant in wisdom, even in the face of defeat; a young African American in prison. Even the writers of the Constitution were resisting the old tyranny of colonization and seeking something that had never been done before – a government so much more radically inclusive than had ever been attempted.

It seems to be those on the margins (the Sojourner Truths, the Malcolm X's, the drag queens of Stonewall) or those who listen deeply to them (the Walt Whitmans and Woody Guthries) these are the ones who cast the vision of what it is to be an American.

And I believe that having some Christians in this mix is good; it is good for America. This is especially so, or maybe only so, because we are no longer really in power. I don't mean that we are marginalized or not privileged – that's ridiculous. I mean that we don't have the cultural power we used to have. We have to work with what we do have, which is Jesus.

A mentor of mine, a man named Bill Jamieson who lives in Asheville, North Carolina told me this story. He used to live in Arizona and worked for the Bruce Babbitt administration in Arizona. Bruce Babbitt for any youngsters out there was a progressive governor many moons ago. Anyhow, Bill served in Bruce Babbitt's cabinet as the Director of Economic Security. He worked to provide a comprehensive social safety net for the vulnerable of Arizona over two terms. Following the Babbitt administration a right wing Republican took over and systematically dismantled Bill's life's work. The safe net fell apart and Arizona became a much more dangerous place to become poor.

As Bill tells it, he was on a plane with a friend, grief stricken by the destruction of the good he had done with his life. His friend said to him, "Bill, we have been seeking to make change in the sandy soil of American culture; we need to make change in the hearts of Americans." Bill did not quit politics, but he did become a deacon in the Episcopal Church and I think his dual commitments make both aspects of his life and work better.

Christians, like America at its best, follow Christ by encounter with those on the margins. This is not to say that we should fetishize suffering or suffering people, but that our

tradition tells us that God is found on the edges. As it is sometimes said, when we draw a line between ourselves and another, Jesus is always on the other side of that line.

That does not mean that we are not called to make decisions and choices or moral stands, but that we can never take comfort in our superiority in doing so.

This is hard. And so it is a bit of a surprise that Jesus says, "Come to me all of you who labor and are heavy laden...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30) This is the guy who said a few weeks ago that to follow him you had to take up your cross.

Hard, right? It is hard to follow Jesus; it is hard to follow in the footsteps of a Martin Luther King or a Susan B. Anthony. But to do so means setting down the burden of pursuing the American dream of more and more success, of endless winning, of busyness that seeks in vain to fill our emptiness. We can set it down. America, or the Romans, don't get to define us; they don't get to judge if we are good enough, beautiful enough, rich enough. That doesn't mean anything to us; it can have no power over us if we unyoke from it and set that burden down. This is a good American thing to do; it is a good Christian thing to do.

Another way you can set your burden down and be a good Christian and a good small "d" democrat is to spend this afternoon in a park, with the old and young, black and white, rich and poor of this congregation and this city and eat together while listening to music². You think this is too easy; that it is not hard enough? Well Jesus paid attention to place and time and to eating and drinking with a variety of folks. It is out of these small encounters that the big ideas came, the larger commitments.

² St. Thomas pianist and Denver jazz legend, Purnell Steen, performed with his band in City Park. Many members of the congregation attended.

Enjoying creation, enjoying each other on a fine day like today is not escape, it can be a kind of resistance. A way of saying that we believe the deadly side of nationalism, the deadly side of empire has no hold on us. We can cast off that yoke and we can help our fellow Americans cast it off as well.

Readings for the service

A READING FROM THE PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

A READING FROM ABIGAIL ADAMS TO JOHN ADAMS, MARCH 31, 1776

"I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation. That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up -- the harsh tide of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the (servants) of your sex; regard us then as being placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness."

A READING FROM CHIEF SEATTLE'S RESPONSE TO A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL'S OFFER TO PURCHASE THE REMAINING SEATTLE LAND, 1845.

We will ponder your proposition and when we decide we will let you know. But should we accept it, I here and now make this condition that we will not be denied the privilege without molestation of visiting at any time the tombs of our ancestors, friends, and children.

Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.

Our departed braves, fond mothers, glad, happy hearted maidens, and even the little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season, will love these somber solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits.

And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children

think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude.

At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.

Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.

A READING FROM A LETTER FROM THE BIRMINGHAM JAIL MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. April 16, 1963

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained.

Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place.

The Negro has many pent up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides -and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history.

So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label.

Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ."

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified.

We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Matthew 11:16-30

¹⁶"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon';¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."²⁰Then

he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”