

A Faithful Patriotism

(Psalm 30; Is 66:10-14; Gal 5:1,13-25; Luke 10:1-3,17-20)

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I'd like to start by saying that, having been away these past several weeks in Mexico, I haven't really been paying attention to what is going on here in this country. But I'm aware that a lot of big things have happened that are important from a faith perspective. I would also like to get around to sharing with you a little bit about our holiday experiences. So I will try to address those things in the near future.

Also, Thank you to the deacons, to Jack Cooper and Rev. Randy Calvo for filling in. If there were some things that happened in worship that you found refreshing and would like to see more of, the deacons and I would be delighted to consider them.

When I lined up the readings which we are using today, it felt as though they laid out a straightforward answer to the question: What does it mean to be a citizen of the United States as a follower of Jesus? - a question appropriate for this holiday weekend.

Right away, the first reading from Isaiah helps us to assume a posture of rejoicing and gratitude for all that we have received. And it does so by drawing on the image of a baby nursing at its mother's breast.

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her-- 66:11 that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

We have only to replace the word Jerusalem with "America" and this passage is exhorting us to take satisfaction from the deep nourishment we have received at our nation's breast. At the same time this image reveals to us our utter dependency and cause for gratitude. For like infants who had no power to choose the circumstances of our birth and were at the mercy of our environment, we should be astounded by our good fortune at being children of so bountiful and conscientious a mother.

We are part of a civilization that, in the past, has prided itself on not being tribalistic, on welcoming the struggling poor of many lands, (from among whom nearly all of us originate) and bidding them to join in enhancing a shared prosperity. Our natural resources, our legacy of a commitment to democratic ideals that shield us from authoritarianism, in short, much of what we enjoy came to us through no effort of our own, and we have found ourselves beneficiaries of the most powerful, prosperous and widespread civilization the world has ever known.

And so the next few lines also echo the American experience:

For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees.

Our prosperity has been like an ever-flowing stream. And yet, we cannot say this without acknowledging in the same breath that much of what we enjoy has been, and still is, borne to us on the backs of the underpaid and overworked poor, both here and abroad. As with every empire, there is a deeply disturbing exploitative side to our own history that we are well aware of, and that we fail to address at our own peril.

But for the purpose of this sermon, I want to speak specifically to those of us who consider ourselves to be the beneficiaries; the ones who have never known days without food or clean water, nights without a roof, feet without shoes or a lack of schools for our children. For those people, among whom I include myself; the cup has never ceased to overflow.

Psalm 30: Humility

When we turn to Psalm 30, there is a continuation of the theme of gratitude to the God who saves and lifts us up. But the Psalm also reveals a stumbling block that, to my mind, also speaks to our American

experience. In the midst of expressions of gratitude there is a moment where the Psalmist reflects on the cause of his own downfall:

As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." By your favor, O LORD, you established me as a strong mountain.

To my mind these words summarize in a nutshell the attitude that is our nation's "Achilles Heel," and the same attitude that has led to the downfall of countless nations and individuals alike. It is "hubris".

The Psalmist confides "I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." In other words, he took his good fortune for granted as something that could not be lost. And he shares that this belief was based on being "favored", as one chosen of God. It was inconceivable to him therefore that he too might be subject to the same ups and downs that applied to the less fortunate. And yet, no sooner did those words of confidence leave his lips, than his prosperity collapsed from beneath him and he found himself uttering words of lament,

You hid your face; I was dismayed. To you, O Lord, I cried, and ... made supplication: "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!"

Perhaps in the psalmist's case there was a bit of poetic justice to the way this happened. A man who had formed an unreasonably high opinion of his place in God's order was promptly knocked off his pedestal; and then perhaps, in the mysterious way in which God works, that very experience of being humiliated, brought him a new and greater experience of blessing, that he had not previously known.

On a personal level, I can understand this as I am sure you can. About ten years ago, my own life set-up completely collapsed. One after the other, the dominos which I had thought were permanent, fell. And I went through several years in which my refrain was almost identical to the Psalmist's lament: "Why are you hiding from me God? What profit is there in my death? Will the dust praise you? O Lord, be my helper!

Unfortunately, I think we are all currently going through something like this on a national level as well, and in a way that also effects each of us personally. Many of us are asking: "What the heck happened? We thought we were a country that was 'too big to fail.'"

A Positive Note

Thankfully, the Psalm finishes on a very positive note, which seems appropriate to this Independence Day Weekend. The Psalmist exclaims

with gratitude to God: “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy!” And we are happy to hear that the psalmist’s perilous downfall is not the end of the story. Having cried out to God in despair, he has received a saving answer. The psalm vindicates the courageous optimism that is a characteristic of our Biblical faith.

Galatians: Self discipline

I guess the Reading from Galatians is the one that speaks most powerfully to me this Independence Day, because it provides us with a practical solution to what ails us as a nation. And it is a solution that dovetails with the high value placed on freedom in our nation’s founding documents. “For freedom Christ has set us free!” says the Apostle Paul in Chapter 5 verse 1: “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to the yoke of slavery.”

And then he goes on to assert that our commitment to “love our neighbors as ourselves is the only way to ensure that our freedom will be lasting; that, if we instead treat our freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, we will soon begin “biting” and “devouring” each other and our freedom will be at an end.

Paul is very specific about the kinds of self-indulgence he believes we must discipline ourselves to avoid:

Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing.

None of these, by the way, are about preventing people from enjoying life. This list is only calling us to avoid being enslaved by things that lead us to harm ourselves and others and deprive us of our freedom.

And Paul's call to discipline is not just a list of what not to do. It is also followed by a series of "to-do's" that are rooted in the life of the Spirit. We should practice being loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful and gentle.

What is interesting to me is, this list of "do's" describes behaviors that are all very spontaneous and it seems to me that the idea of practicing something that ought to be spontaneous, seems counterintuitive. You don't think to yourself "I will now feel generous and then suddenly you feel generous." It's like saying, "I will now laugh." How can you have an authentic laugh unless you are somehow struck by the impulse to laugh from somewhere beyond your own will?

These “do’s” that Paul lists are rooted in emotions that come over us as experiences of grace, as a divine gift that we do not have the power to self-create. And yet somehow practicing them does lead to a more frequent experience of the real thing. If you practice smiling in difficult situations, you may not feel happy. But that practice, by the grace of God, leads to more frequent experiences of happiness, even in difficult situations. And the practice of loving in all these forms, according to Paul, is an essential part of preserving our freedoms. For Paul freedom and love are linked, as though they are two sides of the same coin. The one doesn’t exist without the other.

On Memorial Day, we describe those who gave their lives in service of our nation during wartime with the words, “freedom is not free.” But today on the Fourth of July weekend, when our own patriotism and citizenship is highlighted, I suggest that the commitment to avoiding over-indulgence and practicing the art of loving all of our neighbors is just as essential to the preservation of our freedoms.

Luke: An Evangelistic Spirit

Finally, I think that the Gospel reading puts a cap on the morsel of wisdom that each of the readings has given us for our celebration of Independence Day. It reminds us that ours is a faith that calls us to spread the word. Jesus called on his disciples to go out even into the

“midst of wolves”. And I think that we too have an important message to model and to carry with us throughout this weekend and the year: that using our freedom to over-indulge ourselves, finally divides, enslaves, and makes us sick unto death. While love and freedom love are two sides of the same coin that is the Gospel, and that loving our neighbors is what makes and keeps us free.