

PATRIOTISM, PRESBYTERIAN STYLE

Galatians 6:- 7-16; July 3, 2016

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, c; Independence Day Weekend

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Prayer: We thank you God, for this good day and for this week-end, and for all the ways we will enjoy the inheritance of our freedom. We thank you for the freedom to speak and read and travel; freedom to imagine and to turn dreams into plans; for the freedom to be here in worship. Startle us with your truth, your grace, your love. In Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

It has been suggested that the ultimate faux pas of 21st century America is to talk about God at a cocktail party. It just isn't done. Mentioning politics in church is perhaps an ecclesiastical analog to the social phenomenon. You can talk about providence, predestination, prayer, purpose and even prevenient grace, but politics? Let's not bring it into the sanctuary.

But if one talks about "Patriotism, Presbyterian Style," one cannot help but bring politics into the sanctuary. Think about it: The American Revolution was about politics, and Presbyterians were so involved in that revolution that in England it was called "The Presbyterian Rebellion," and the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister and president of what is now Princeton University. So bear with me!

It may surprise you that the earliest Christian creed, "Jesus is Lord," was also the most profound political statement that one could ever make. Political because in the days of high Roman imperialism, it meant that the emperor was not Lord. The state was not Lord. Only Jesus was Lord. And in that simple affirmation, Christianity deprived the emperor, and every totalitarianism in history, from Nero to Hitler, to failed Marxist regimes in Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union, it deprived them of the one thing totalitarianism must have, and that is the unquestioned loyalty and obedience of its subjects. Make no mistake about it: "Jesus Christ is Lord" was...and is...a political statement of the first order. And people who said it were not scolded for their misguided theology. They were executed for treason.

What Christians from the first century through today were all referring to was that most important and precious tenet of what later became the Reformed tradition of which Presbyterians are a part: The doctrine of the sovereignty of God. It was that doctrine developed more fully by John Calvin, our father in the Reformed faith, that helped to establish a healthy tension in our own country between church and state. Indeed, for those of us who are Presbyterian, no one has done more to shape the substance and style of our patriotism than Calvin.

Oh, he wasn't one of our Founding Fathers 240 years ago (he lived in 16th century Geneva). But far more than most of us are aware, I think, the character and the structure of this country (especially in the areas of public schools and industrial capitalism and democratic government)

have been born out of the thought and practice of John Calvin. In fact, one German historian once wrote in what was an overstatement but certainly had an element of truth that “John Calvin was the virtual founder of America.” Witherspoon took Calvin’s theology and taught it to James Madison.

What was it that made Calvin so popular with James Madison and James Mason and other founding fathers? It was at least in part the assertion that the sovereignty of God meant that there were limitations on the sovereignty of any human authority: king, government, or church. They had experienced a sovereign king without those limitations and felt it was important to set up the government with a system of checks and balances. Only God was sovereign!

But more than that it seems appropriate on this Independence Day week-end to note the intricate way in which Calvin’s theology and politics were so woven together into a civic duty that *religious* responsibility and *political* responsibility could hardly be distinguished. God, you see, was sovereign over *all* of creation. All of one’s life at every moment has to do with the living God, and that meant in affairs of state as in affairs of church. Calvin would support the separation of the institutions of church and state as we know it today, but he believed that the purpose of every institution and every individual was the enhancement of human life and the building of what he called the holy community.

In other words, God cares about what goes on not just in our hearts, or in our sanctuaries on Sunday morning, but what goes on in the board room, on Wall Street, under the capital dome and in the White House, as well as the kitchen table and the school house. John Calvin actually had as one of his responsibilities making sure that the credentials of the dentists in Geneva were up to date, and they would have to work on him so that he could be sure. Why? Because of the theological conviction that is the foundation of the Reformed faith, the conviction that God is concerned with more than ecclesiastical matters. Whatever God is concerned about, those are the things that God’s people are to be concerned about.

But there is one more fundamental right that Calvin related with the sovereignty of God that is precious to us in the Reformed faith. “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” which means that the church is not a place where one ought to be told either what to think how to decide about political issues, or how to vote. In our Presbyterian tradition, we also believe that there are truths over which people of good character and conscience may differ. But there is also the abiding affirmation that God’s redeeming and reconciling work is taking place, not only in our individual lives, but in the societies of which we are a part.

The glory of this experiment called democracy is precisely the idea of the limitations of government when it comes to the matters of conscience and faith and its protection of the liberty of all its citizens to follow the dictates of their own consciences.

Some have observed that most of the nations of the world are organized on some principle of exclusion: race, religion, language, tribe, ethnicity. And with frightening violence, exclusive groups are willing to go to war with other groups to protect their own exclusiveness.

Every time I am out of the country, I understand more clearly how unique and precious this experiment is. We *are* different here, and we as a nation are at our best when we realize that. This is for *all* of us.

I read not too long ago a speech that was given by a man that works for the Chicago Stock Exchange and who spends a lot of time traveling in developing countries, what used to be called "The Third World." He is an African American, and knows something about racial exclusiveness. It has not been easy for him in the banking world. But in this speech he said "I'm a liberal in so many ways, and there's a lot about what's going on that I don't like, but I love this country. I travel a lot and I see the lines of people at our embassies all over the world trying to get in. Why? Because they've heard about our freedom and opportunity and chance here: that everyone is included."

Cornel West, head of the Department of African American studies at Princeton, has written that the greatest danger to our country right now is the loss of that inclusivity. "Over two hundred years after the beginning of this precious democratic project, democracy is fragile....this notion that we are all in this together, that if the ship springs a leak, we are all going to drown.

West and other historians note that the founders of the Republic, even though they did not include women and the people who were brought here as slaves, nevertheless put in place a system that acknowledges the public arena, the common good. It's in 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 defense,
Promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves
And our posterity, do order and establish this Constitution....**

The general welfare. It's for *all* of us, not just those of us who came from Northern Europe, but those who came from Asia, and Africa, and Central and South America, and the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Now, let's be clear, the authors of the Bible knew nothing about a representative democracy, or a system of checks and balances, or the separation of the institutions of church and state. But the apostle Paul understood something about "the general welfare," and the nature of freedom. The letter to the Galatians is often called "The Magna Carta of Christian Liberty." The issues that divided the Christians there make issues the divide Republicans and Democrats today appear to be molehills rather than mountains. What does it mean to be a follower of

Christ? Must one first be a Jew before becoming a Christian? Must one keep the law of Moses? These questions were splitting the church as it was forming.

And it was in that context that Paul wrote his appeal to equality based upon the freedom we have in our baptism: “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for *all* of you are one in Christ.” He went on: “For freedom, Christ has set us free.... But do *not* use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” He brought his letter to a close by encouraging self-giving in faithful service, gratitude, and humility, rather than arrogance, hubris, and an emphasis on differences based on spiritual gifts and graces. For Paul, life in community should be governed by faithful stewardship of *all* of our resources.

So what does a patriotism Presbyterian style look like? Here are some suggestions. I would suggest that it begins with gratitude to God, giving thanks for the precious experiment that in spite of its lapses, its occasional forgetfulness about its own most precious traditions, still intends to include all of God’s children and to hold up to the world a picture of what human life under God’s sovereignty might look like.

I would suggest that we need a renewed sense of the public good, the general welfare, and we Presbyterians particularly need to take our stand for a nation and a culture which is truly inclusive, where no one is excluded by reason of race, religion, class, or ethnicity. And we need to make our voice heard a little more clearly whenever the name “Christian” is misappropriated by any group that claims God’s truth, God’s will as its own private property.

I would suggest that we need to stop shouting slogans at one another and learn again the gift of the freedom we have in public discourse, expressing differences of opinion without calling into questions the political loyalty or religious orthodoxy of others. And that has to begin here in the church where we affirm that God alone is Lord of the conscience.

I would suggest that among our most precious values is a sense of the community, the public, the whole people and that when all the people do not have access to the best the culture produces...education, public safety, health care, housing, and opportunity—for whatever reason—it is our sacred duty, *our patriotic duty* to change the system and do better.

We learned that Elie Weisel died yesterday, a survivor of Auschwitz and one of the great moral leaders of our day. Reading his classic book “Night” and studying that history for years, I have asked again and again, “Where was the church?” And it was the church, from the bishop on down, who said “Stick to spiritual issues. Don’t get involved in politics.” Now, contrast that with the civil rights movement in our own country, born in the bosom of the church, which saw even politics as a way to make our country more in line with God’s vision for our world.

It is a vision of a covenant community marked by concern for neighbor and faithfulness before God. It is *that* vision that will keep us Americans from withdrawing into our private lives and arming ourselves and finally giving up on one another.

This democratic experiment, despite all its failings, really is a wonder, isn't it? Perhaps that's why we get a lump in our throats when we sing "The Star Spangled Banner" at Grizzlies games. There is the black guy and the white guy and the 3 year old kid and the octogenarian and the person who thinks Donald Trump hung the moon and the person who works the phone banks for Hillary Clinton. There is the straight person and the gay person, the Republican and the Democrat, the Muslim, the Jew, the Christian—all standing there with their hands over their hearts wishing one another well. It's a wonder this whole mess holds together, but it does; and if you're looking for someone to thank for it, give thanks to the God and Father of us all.

Amen.

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