

AN HONEST PATRIOTISM

Preached by the Reverend Sarah Segal McCaslin

July 4, 2010

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scripture: Luke 20:21-26; Galatians 6:1-10

On March 23rd of this year, the Goshen College baseball team played a doubleheader against Siena Heights University. Later that same afternoon, the softball team played a doubleheader against St. Joseph's. At first glance, there was nothing remarkable about the Goshen Maple Leafs participating in the American tradition of college sports. What made these ball games historic took place just prior to the opening pitch, when an instrumental version of the national anthem played for the first time since Goshen began participating in intercollegiate athletics in the mid 1950s.

Goshen College is owned by the Mennonite Church USA, an historic peace church, and describes itself as a Christ-centered institution of higher learning, committed to the core values of passionate learning, global citizenship, compassionate peacemaking and servant-leadership.

In an address to the student body and faculty at a town hall meeting the following day, Goshen College President Jim Brenneman offered his account of the school's decision to play the anthem for the first time:

"At Goshen College, our entire learning process is framed by a commitment to address complex problems- no matter the discipline- and to do so with academic rigor and civility. Playing the national anthem or not before our games is one such complex issue for us.

The crux of the matter has to do with our relationship with God and with our country. We are asking ourselves such questions as: how should faithful Christians order their allegiances? How do we celebrate the freedoms and opportunities of this country and still challenge [the] injustices that also exist in our midst? And how does a church college retain its historic peace heritage while welcoming an increasingly diverse student body from other traditions?"¹

He pointed out that the community of Goshen College includes students whose parents or grandparents were conscientious objectors and grew up with a deep suspicion of patriotic observances; students raised as pacifists with no objection to playing the anthem; students whose relatives serve in the military and proudly fly the U.S. flag in honor of their service; students who are children of new immigrants who love their country for the freedom it has given their families; and international students for whom the Star-Spangled Banner has no personal meaning whatsoever.

For the supporters of Goshen's decision, playing the national anthem is not a declaration of partisan allegiance, but a refusal to maintain the status quo of the school's

own history, and an intentional decision to engage in dialogue around the complex problem of patriotism and Christian faith.

Today we celebrate our dual identities and come face to face with the ambiguities of carrying dual-citizenship. Today is Sunday, a sacred day to us as Christians when we gather together to share in the public worship of God, and this morning to partake in the bread of life and cup of salvation offered us by and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Today is also Independence Day, a secular holiday (of cookouts, fireworks and long weekends) set aside to celebrate the founding of our nation. If ever there was a moment when our dual identities come into direct contact, this is it.

(Of course, not everyone here this morning is an American citizen. Some of you are visiting from other countries, tourists in our hot but wonderful city; some of you are foreign residents, living here now but retaining the citizenship of your birth; some of you may desire to become citizens but are barred by law from doing so. And the rest of us are citizens by circumstance or accident, having had no say with our parents about where we were born.)

As Presbyterians, we claim a little extra fame on this day- our Reformed views of God's sovereignty and of human sinfulness (as well as our polity of representative governance) moved the new nation toward a system of checks and balances and the separation of powers. John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister and president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), was the only active clergy person to sign the Declaration of Independence.

None of us is ignorant to the history and complexity of the American national identity, born out of a revolution, constituted with words and phrases like liberty and 'the pursuit of happiness', but founded upon actions of gross violence and injustice to native peoples and enslaved Africans. It's a mixed bag, to say the least, of things to be proud of and things to be ashamed of. Actions to celebrate and actions to mourn.

For 234 years, we and those who came before us have woven a complicated web of faith and national allegiances that does nothing to answer the riddle of what it means to be both Christian and honest patriot.

The Gospel story we heard from Luke this morning is a tale of conflicting allegiances, in this case between God and Caesar. The scribes and religious authorities, desperate to get rid of Jesus, resort to espionage (an old and enduring profession!) to accomplish their dirty work. Masquerading as honest men, spies ask Jesus, under the pretense of sincerity and faithfulness, about the lawfulness of paying taxes to Caesar, as those who claim primary allegiance to God. Jesus' answer is simple- Render to the state what belongs to the state; render to God what belongs to God. And Jesus' answer is complicated- Reserve for God a level of fidelity that supersedes any other obligation, including the state.²

The story, and Jesus' pronouncement, is not a treatise on church-state relations or on the civil duties of the Christian. Rather, the force of the statement is to warn against rendering to Caesar what one should rightfully give only to God.³

In modern parlance, this means that, as a Christian, patriotism should never assume the fervor, or make the absolute claims, of our faith. Yet the determination of what should be 'given' to our national allegiance and what should be reserved for God must be worked out in every particular situation. But "To be Christian demands an absolute, unconditional, and ultimate allegiance to God, whereas allegiance to a nation... can only ever be relative, conditional, and penultimate."⁴ And so we are faced with the dilemma of what to do when these two identities clash and converge.

The venerable pastor, preacher and theologian, William Sloane Coffin, suggests that there are "three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world."

The 'bad' patriots, as Coffin describes them, are often parodied and easy to recognize- the flag-waving, truck driving, Fox News watching, red-state living uncritical lovers, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the eyeglass-wearing, Prius driving, BBC watching, blue-state living loveless critics. Maybe we know where we fall within those stereotypes. Maybe we are convinced enough of our own rightness to be convicted by Coffin's definition as a 'bad' patriot. But Coffin, as a Christian and social ethicist, suggests that our calling as Christians is clear, and it requires more from us than blind faith or reckless skepticism, zealotry or apathy. As good or honest patriots, we must engage our nation with the same love and fidelity with which we engage in our relationship with God.

Our relationship with God, when it is full and healthy, has an elasticity that can accommodate the stretch and pull of difference without ripping. And our relationship with one another, in the church or in our country, must be made of that same malleable material, capable of withstanding pressure, capable of shifting shape without losing its integrity- A lover's quarrel.

Paul's instructions to the small Galatian community really has nothing to do with patriotism at all, but is a powerful discourse on heavenly citizenship that is meant to inform every aspect of our lives, including our national allegiance. Paul offers the Galatian church instruction on living under the new law of Christ- the law of neighborly and self-sacrificial love. Paul commends the fledgling faith community to live interdependently- bearing responsibility for one another, being accountable to one another, reconciling with one another in gentleness and humility.

Paul understands the human tendency to mess up, to act according to self-interest, to live a life in comparison to and competition with others; and so Paul invites members into a twofold practice: the first is a practice of mutual correction, in the context of self-examination (as in Jesus' words- "Before pointing out the speck in someone else's eye, take a quick look in the mirror to see the log pointing out of your own."), and the second, a practice of mutual care-giving, in the context of humility and generosity.

Paul writes, "You who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness..." Mature Christians, who have received the Spirit of Christ, are charged to care for those in need of restoration—without pride and without being judgmental, and avoiding the temptation to scrutinize the lives of those who struggle for the sake of claiming the moral high ground. Paul yearns for the church to find a way out of the finger-pointing righteousness that often comes along with any society's efforts to correct itself, so he sets his injunction alongside the obligation to be accountable for one's own actions first. "Test your own work, rather than your neighbor's work... for all must carry their own loads."

Paul knows there is strife in the Galatian Church; Paul knows there is a need for reconciliation in the community. He does not commend the church to blind loyalty to one another, but to gentle and honest correction when any in the community errs.

Secondly, Paul calls on the community of faith to look after itself in mutual concern, "to bear one another's burdens." Keep track of your own responsibilities, but look after the interests of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Be accountable to them, as you will ultimately be accountable to God. Act always with generosity, concern and compassion. Support those who teach you. Be willing to go above and beyond; don't keep score. Let the movement of the Spirit guide your actions, not the concerns of the world. Be mindful of eternal things more so than temporal ones. Seek the reconciliation of the community. Whenever you have the opportunity, work for the good of all, foremost for those to whom you are joined as followers of the new law of love.

Our Christian faith provides a moral baseline from which to begin the building of a more honest patriotism, and it provides a model of fidelity that encompasses critique. Our faithfulness to God can easily accommodate an honest patriotism, even if the reverse is no guarantee. If the Bible can ever be clear, it is clear on this point: we are citizens of a heavenly realm before we are citizens of a country. Our community is the Church first, then the world- it is the order that we give favor and preference, and the order from which we draw instruction. According to Paul's model of citizenship in the kingdom of God, we ought, more accurately, to think of ourselves as geographic, cultural, national and ethnic egalitarians; for us there is no geographic center of the world, but only a constellation of points equidistant from the heart of God.⁵

This framework for faithful citizenship and egalitarianism will be put to the test this week among our own, as the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) gathers in Minneapolis to grapple with some of the most painfully divisive topics in the church- ordination standards, same gender marriage, and the Middle East. In committees and plenary, commissioners and advocates will engage in difficult conversation; and likely, lines will be crossed, civility abandoned, unkind words spoken. Hopefully, someone will intone the words of Paul, and the body will right itself, like a ship after a storm, battered and soggy, but still afloat. And hopefully, a Spirit of gentleness will settle over the convention center, and our brothers and sisters will not grow weary from doing what is right, even when it is hard.

And for the rest of us, perhaps our civic activism will take on new meaning, and we will feel the gentle but insistent pressure that as God's emissaries and honest patriots, we are responsible for all of humankind, not just those with whom we share citizenship. And perhaps we will find the gumption and the humility to bear the burdens of those with whom we disagree, doing right even when it is hard, for the sake of creating the kind of home that our forefathers and mothers had in mind when they carved out this new American identity, those many years ago.

¹ <http://www.goshen.edu/anthem/>

² R. Alan Culpepper. "Luke," *NIB, Volume IX* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Dan Clendenin. "Believers without Borders: Christian Ambivalence on the 4th of July" (www.journeyswithjesus.net/Essays/20100628JJ.shtml).

⁵ *Ibid.*