

Sermon for July 1, 2018 – “Liberty and Justice”

13th Sunday in OT, Year B – Texts: Deut. 10:17-21; Heb. 11:8-16; Matt. 5:43-48

Rev. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

As we prepare to celebrate our nation’s 242nd (if my math is correct) anniversary this Wednesday, I think that reflecting on our liberty, freedom, and relationship with God, the giver of ALL liberty, is a pretty good idea. We learn from our first reading from Deuteronomy that the foundation of our liberty is conceived in justice, that our **“great God...is not partial and takes no bribe...executes justice for the orphan and widow and loves strangers, providing them food and clothing.”** How does this stack up against our current political realities? Last week, we talked about welcoming the stranger. Our readings reminded us that the call to welcome the stranger is anchored in the Torah and were a part of the measure of the Hebrew community’s faithfulness to God, that the same attitude toward hospitality was true in the early Christian communities, and that welcoming prophets, righteous ones and “little ones” was a disciplined practice of the young churches. We said too, that hospitality should be the central practice of the church today, of our own church. We quoted one author who said that “hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls.”

As we continue our discussion, we find today that the author of the Book of Deuteronomy also exhorts the hearer to love the stranger and fear the Lord. In our time, that’s not a popular standard. Rather, the reverse seems to be what we hear. People talk of loving God but fearing the stranger. How did that happen? What’s changed? I’d say that **very** strong argument can be made that **everything** changed on September 11, 2001. At the same time, as Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda writes, “A person’s true nature is revealed at times of the greatest adversity.” There were plenty of heroes on that day, and since, in the war on terror but it might be equally true to say that the fear/distrust of the foreign has always been a part of our country’s history; a part of the fabric of this country that no one wants to admit to or talk about. Emma Lazarus wrote a poem titled “The New Colossus” in 1893 to help raise funds for the Statue of Liberty which was completed three years later. The poem, often cited as representative of the U.S. approach to immigration, contains these familiar words; “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” But bigotry against even European-American immigrants was rife at the time Lazarus wrote the poem and immigration quotas based on racial hierarchies formally passed in 1924 and would remain in effect until 1965.

How many of you know what Executive Order 9066 is? Issued by Franklin Roosevelt in 1942, it established Japanese internment camps were established during World War II. From 1942 to 1945, it was the policy of the U.S. government that people of Japanese descent would be interred in isolated camps. Enacted in reaction to Pearl Harbor and the ensuing war these camps were among the worst human rights violations in U.S. history. Lazarus’ poem to freedom represented an unrealized ideal and, sadly, still does. It would seem, then, that we’ve strayed from the fundamentals of liberty and justice for all? Yet people still desperately come to America for those things; the justice of a paying job, the liberty to be free from corruption and sinister dictatorships.

In the passage from Hebrews we look at Abraham and Sarah’s faith. They themselves were strangers and foreigners, people seeking a homeland, people desiring a better life in a new country. It’s that desire that still dominates much of our civil discourse and should be the standard of our Christian community. A better country, in the terms described in Deuteronomy, means a just country for everyone, including the stranger. We all are, in some way, strangers seeking a better country. And by “stranger” I’m not talking about **just** immigrants. I’m talking about **anyone** who is on the outside looking in. Anyone excluded simply because they’re different. In many ways we’re all strangers or can be, depending on the circumstances, which can easily and quickly change. It’s common to talk of disillusionment and be discouraged about the future of our nation, our culture, and our society.

Still, Christians are called to be un-common in the way we talk about these things. We maintain a critical and sometimes prophetic stance about injustice and the treatment of the poor and oppressed so, we cannot join the chorus of those who are only negative. We see in our own failures the need for us to place ourselves under God's gracious leadership. Without that, we have no "Good News" to offer.

As it says in today's reading from Matthew "**And if you greet only your brothers and sisters what more are you doing than others?**" So, what is the Good News in a time of economic uncertainty and national disillusionment? The Good News is that we find in the strangers among us, in those who would perhaps be our enemy, the future of peace through just relationships with all of our neighbors.

A number of years ago, the Dalai Lama was visiting the United States. While here, he spoke to several university communities in a number of cities. He said he loved America because of its passion for energy, new ideas, and continuing exploration and change. He also said that he is grateful for our leadership but questions our motives in some of our political decisions. His was, and is, a message of peace... one that echoes the gospel reading for today... that loving our enemies and persecutors is the only way forward. We Christians should give serious consideration to his message because we Christians are called to be advocates of the Good News of Jesus Christ. **That's** how we celebrate our freedom and proclaim our liberty. Taking on that Good News means we have to change our values to those of Christ. We cannot ignore the stranger among us nor can we simply write off our enemies. But we do just that all the time. Now, I'm by no means saying that we need to pay no attention to the situation at our borders or grant amnesty to illegal aliens. I am saying that there's got to be a better way to handle our immigration issues. I say that because Jesus calls us to a higher standard which means that we have to have difficult conversations and make tough decisions. And I'm not just talking on a national level. There are lessons for the Church as well in terms of the way we welcome the stranger. We've done much as a Church (capital C) in the last few decades; things like learning how to speak civilly about our differences, attempting to reconcile with those who differ from us, and taking up the cause of justice for those who are treated unjustly. Sadly, this has thinned our ranks, but it's also helped us perfect our faith. As strange as that might sound, that's something to celebrate in a nation where it's still possible to proclaim and actually **expect** liberty and justice for all. It's only when we begin to embrace the stranger that we'll find ourselves growing from their ranks. As they join the church a whole new culture of Christian growth of liberty and freedom emerges. That's the **vision** of Deuteronomy. That's the **faith** described in the passage from Hebrews that desires a better country. That's the **Good News** of the gospel; the Good News that moves from greeting only those like us to embracing the stranger, finding in that embrace the God of liberty and justice for us all.

Thanks be to God.

May he continue to bless us and our great nation.

Amen and amen.