

Sermon for July 3, 2016 – “Pledging Allegiance”

14th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Hebrews 11:1-16; Matthew 5:38-48

A Jewish Rabbi and a Catholic Priest met at the town’s annual Fourth of July picnic. Old friends, they began their usual banter. “Mrs. Hall brought her prized Virginia Baked Ham again this year,” the priest teased the rabbi, “you really ought to try it. “I know it’s against your religion, but I can’t understand why such a wonderful food should be forbidden! You don’t know what you’re missing”. They sat down and ate and after a few bites of the ham, the priest said: “My, this baked ham is really delicious.” “Tell me, Rabbi, when are you going to break down and try it?” The rabbi looked at the priest with a big grin, and said, “At your wedding.”

I’d like to read two sentences from two very different sources. The first is: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands...” The second is: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” The first, of course, is the first line in the Pledge of Allegiance, while the second, likely the lesser known one, comes from the baptismal liturgy in our Book of Common Worship. Both sentences say a great deal about us, about who we are. What do I mean? Well, let me put it this way. When we enter into worship of the triune God something happens. We give witness to the truth that we’re citizens of a commonwealth wider than that of the nation of our birth. We, as members of the body of Christ across time and space, are a people without borders. We pledge allegiance not to any earthly power or principality but to the sovereign God of the universe made known to us in a first-century Jewish carpenter/revolutionary.

In the liturgy, we enact a story of salvation and freedom that incorporates all other stories. Baptism, the Christian’s **Dependence** Day, since we acknowledge and celebrate our reliance on others, grants a new identity that transcends all other identity markers. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted, “Those who are baptized no longer belong to the world, no longer serve the world, and are no longer subject to it. They belong to Christ alone and relate to the world only through Christ.” Our Book of Order is a little more explicit saying that “The body of Christ is one, and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ.” “As they are united with Christ through faith, Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place.” “Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.”

You may recall that in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 there was a renewed nostalgia for the pledge of allegiance and the American flag was everywhere, flying in neighborhoods and in churches across the country. These were potent symbols around which Americans could unite in their sorrow in spaces both secular and sacred. In the post-9/11 context of American Christianity, there remains the remnant of a new type of nationalism. While it’s waned somewhat in the last few years but remains fairly strong in communities of faith all across the theological and liturgical spectrum, often linked to hyper-patriotism, this nationalism reveals, at best, a deep confusion about the relationship between church and nation. And, at worst, a willingness to set aside the Church’s historic confession that Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord. The question is why? What’s this all about?

Well, it seems to me that in the years since the Second World War, nationalism has come to be ever more closely linked with consumer capitalism. Citizenship in the Western cultures is not so much based on cultivating a virtuous populace than it is on ensuring access to the market and the availability of goods and services. Not surprisingly, this is now the template for the citizen's relationship with the state. In other words, our worth in society is not based on whether or not we're good or moral people but what goods/services we purchase and how often we purchase them. Sadly, individuals have largely been reduced to a demographic statistic, which has led to a rise in consumerism. Worse, this consumerism has spread to the Church (with a capital "C"). Sadly, many churches have willingly (though often unwittingly) bought into, encouraged, even underwritten it. Some, to the extent of fostering an idolatrous patriotism and in doing so, these churches have betrayed their distinctive, baptismally-derived witness as a politics in its own right.

Baptism initiates us into a community whose mission is to communicate to the world, writes Christian author Marva Dawn, a "deep vision of the extravagant splendor of God." Our task is to witness to **this** God and not any other god, certainly not the god (that's god with small "g") who presides over American civil piety; a piety whose content can be determined by the narrow interests of a nation determined to guard its own power, security and interests.

Tomorrow is the Fourth of July, Independence Day. I have to tell you I love it. I love everything about it. I love the picnics, parades, baseball, fireworks, the 1812 Overture. I'm grateful for my country even when I don't agree with its policies and practices. I'm grateful because the **freedom** to disagree and dissent, the **responsibility** to disagree and dissent, and to participate in the national conversation, is very close to what the "American experiment" was originally all about.

"There are three kinds of patriots," William Sloane Coffin once said, "two bad and one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. The good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with the world." Patriotism here is not so much about the **land** as it is about **ideas**. Of course, we love the land, from sea to shining sea. But we don't call it the "Fatherland" (as the Nazi's referred to Germany) or "Mother America" (the way the Soviets referred to their country as "Mother Russia"). No – patriotism here is about concepts, ideas, and values. In writing about patriotism, Coffin writes, "How do you love America?" "Don't say 'My country, right or wrong.' "That's like saying 'My grandmother, drunk or sober', it doesn't get you anywhere. Don't just salute the flag and don't burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean.

The question then is this: How do we answer Coffin's question? How do we love America? Is it with something of the love of Christ? Is it with the vision and compassion of Christ, a transcendent ethic that alone can fulfill the "patriot's dream?" One that sees "beyond the years, alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears"? How do we love America?

When Jesus was asked one day about the relationship between politics and religion, God and the state, He answered memorably, but ambiguously. He said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." But he didn't draw the line between the two. In fact, to conclude from Jesus' words that the two realms, Caesar's and God's, are separate is a mistake. God is sovereign over both, over everything. To God alone we give our ultimate devotion and loyalty because God alone is worthy of it. And I'm thinking that Jesus' deliberate ambiguity is all about making us responsible – not just for our **personal** faith, but for the society and, to some extent, world in which we live.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing. We're to witness to the Triune God in whose name we're baptized, a God made known through the people of Israel whom He freed from slavery in Egypt, a God made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the One who freed all humankind from the slavery of sin, and in the ongoing mission of the Church. A Church that has been set free, according to Paul, **“so that we may enjoy the benefits of freedom.”** This God seeks to renew and restore the whole created order not to preserve powerful republics and their ideologies. This God calls us to a life lived after the pattern of Jesus and through baptism our lives are united with His and offered back to us as gifts so that we might become conduits of God's love and grace.

This is the freedom we seek to enjoy, on the 4th of July and every day of our lives. This is the God to whom we pledge our eternal allegiance!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.