

Sermon – “Citizens of the Kingdom”

Sunday, July 5, 2020

Scripture Readings: Romans 7:15-25a and Matthew 11:16-30

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Our first reading comes from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, in which he discusses the difficulty of belonging to, and knowing of, the higher laws and truths of God while still being an inhabitant of this imperfect world and his own imperfect self. Listen to these words from Romans 7, verse 15 through the first part of verse 25.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Here Jesus is teaching the crowds, discussing their reactions to those sent by God: John the Baptist and himself, and finishing with an invitation. Here now God’s Word in Matthew 11, verses 16-30.

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’”

“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father."

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

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At this time of year, the minds of Americans often return to the events of 244 years ago this July, when the founders of this nation declared their independence from another. As inheritors of what they began, it is proper for us to consider the nature of what we have inherited. As copilots of what they set in motion, it is essential for us to do so.

This pulpit is not the place for a full examination of the political institutions within which we reside; however, the church is at the same time the *only* place where certain important discussions about them can occur. The most fundamental question we who follow Jesus must ponder in our annual reflections on patriotism is this: what does it mean to be both a Christian and a citizen of the United States of America?

To be sure, that is not a question that can fit within the space of a single, short sermon, but we can at least briefly consider the foundational matter of approach. For there are many approaches to reconciling the two facts of living within one of the nations of the earth while simultaneously holding allegiance to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Some people attempt to divide themselves into a kind of split personality: there are the affairs of politics and the affairs of religion, and the two never meet. If our scriptures spoke of a God whose demands of us only went as far as the Sanctuary door, caring only for whether we perform the proper religious rituals and make our tithes, that way might be open to us. But no serious reader of the Christian Bible can honestly come away with the idea that God cares nothing for the questions of whether the nations conduct themselves justly or not. Our God is the judge of all nations. Strong words permeate scripture about this; it is not merely individuals alone in their personal lives, but entire systems and governments which are preached of, prophesied about, and given the mandate to come in line with God's righteousness.

Remembering this context we see and consider the rebukes given by Jesus in Matthew 11. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."¹ He is not scolding singular people, but entire cities for what they have done, and for failing to turn from their former ways even when shown the light. This moment doesn't paint a picture of a Christ who cares only about individual personal redemption, although he may well care plenty about that as well; no, he, like any good Old Testament prophet, has great interest in what we

¹ Matthew 11:-22 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

do as whole peoples together and as institutions. The prophets are quite noisy about this.² Are the poor neglected? Is it at the expense of the weak that the strong grow rich? Is there favoritism in the affairs of state? Is there hypocrisy, words of God's law being spoken loudly and proudly while the institutions and leaders proclaiming those words orient themselves against the Spirit by whom those Godly words came?

These are questions asked numerous times by our Bible, and we are under obligation, as part of faithful Christian life, to continue asking them. Simply put, if God cares what nations, peoples, and their governments do, then so must we.

There are also those who go another way, who marry religion and government to the extent that church and state are not identifiably separate institutions at all. This has been much more pervasive in other eras, but there remain countries which as a matter of law identify national citizenship with Islam, Christianity, Judaism, atheism, or some other religious mandate. In many more places, including our own, despite lacking an official statutory religion, a sizeable number of people nevertheless informally think in a way which does not imagine any separation between religious and governmental authority.

Now make no mistake; for God to rule us directly would be...well, it is what we pray for again and again: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"³ we plead week after week. And yet even though it is Christ who taught us to pray those words, and though the promised Second Coming promises just that, there can be little question that we pray for it because it is not yet here. Many early followers of Jesus expected the Messiah to operate through the channels of worldly power, undoing the rulers of the world and taking their crowns upon himself. When he did not, it was perplexing, especially when it culminated with his complete submission to the decidedly un-Godly "justice" they doled out. "My kingdom is not from this world," he declared to Pontius Pilate when accepting the fate of crucifixion.⁴

So those who would seize the reins of power and wield them with the claim of Godly mandate have some things which should give them pause, considering Jesus himself refused to do exactly that. Every powerful nation within the Christian world has faced the temptation to wear the mantle of heavenly sanction, imagining itself to be the establishment of God's rule on earth; never mind that Biblically the New Jerusalem is not born of this earth at all.⁵

A great many serious evils have come out of the wish to intermix worldly national identity with Christian identity as if they are one and the same. God and country rightly are two of our deep places of allegiance, but we must be careful never to let the phrase in our minds blur into a single word, "God-n-country", as if any act on behalf of either is an act on behalf of the other. We may start out with the best intentions, but proclaiming God in the name of the state never fails eventually to mutate, accidentally or otherwise, into proclaiming the state in the name of God. Nations being as they are, run by human beings, with human desires and

² See themes found, for example, in the preachings of Micah, Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.

³ The Lord's prayer, as taught by Jesus to his followers in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.

⁴ From John 18:36 (NRSV).

⁵ The promised city in which God's rule is finally direct and thoroughly present seems to be entirely a creation or re-creation of God: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." -Revelation 21:1-2 (NRSV).

interests, the identification of Godly endorsement with their choices provides nothing but a terrible freedom for those leaders to enact every human temptation in the exercise of power, religion serving as helpful disguise for raw self-interest, using people's sense of obligation to their faith as a way to bring them along. Tying loyalty to nation and loyalty to God into such a tightly tangled knot is a great gift to anyone who wishes to use power without restraint or accountability. It is not so good for the world, however, nor for the bodies—or souls—of the people who make up that nation.

So what are we left with? If God cares about the injustices of the nations, disconnecting our citizenship from our faith is not possible. Yet if joining those two as if they are one, mixing the holy and the profane, gives leaders license to do evil in the name of good, we cannot do that, either. What remains?

There is an interesting little phrase in the American Pledge of Allegiance. In the early 1950's, two words were inserted into what had spoken formerly of "one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Now, the addition of the words "under God" into that pledge do certainly have some ambiguity. One can see it as treading toward dangerous ground, hinting at Godly favor for everything we choose to do. But there is another way to hear the phrase "one nation, under God;" that is, *literally*.

Which is to say, there is, in fact, an obvious way our national citizenship and our heavenly citizenship are related. I call it obvious, but it is somehow easy to forget. These two citizenships are neither disconnected nor identical; rather, one is *under* the other. God is everlasting and infinite, over the entire universe. The longest lived of earthly nations is but a speck on a tiny earth, here and gone in a blink of time even over the millennia of the church's history to date, much less over the time span of eternity. We give loyalty to the group into which we are born, and in good patriotic fashion many have given their bodily lives in service to their country. But our very *souls* belong to the Lord, and any institution of earthly law is only a distant, fallen echo of the deeper lawgiving of the power who rules and judges the universe.

Sometimes people debate whether American flags should be present in church sanctuaries. Some have very strong feelings about this; I only want to preach one thing on it, which might frustrate you for lack of answering the question directly: the flag is a symbol of our citizenship, our citizenship is part of our identity, and like any part of ourselves, bringing our citizenship in these doors is proper inasmuch as we bring it *to lay it at the foot of Christ and offer it up as part of what we wish to allow to be God's*. It is improper inasmuch as we bring it, or any part of ourselves, here to be glorified and preached alongside Christ. As Paul said in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, "[W]e do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord."⁶ The church is not here to preach Americanism or any other nationalism; there is a much older, grander, higher thing going on here. But everything about who we are: our personhood, family, and country, is always rightly here as part of what we bring before God and offer: our lives complete, under God.

⁶ From 2 Corinthians 4:5 (NRSV).

And what follows? There is a reason I think this is worth spending time on. What it means to be both an American and a Christian is not an abstract question. Many people throughout history have lived their entire lives with essentially no control whatsoever over the choices of the governments under which they lived. To be a citizen and a Christian meant simply to live personally as a Christian, and whenever this came in conflict with the decrees of the state, to find the courage to continue following Christ, knowing it might mean submitting, as Christ did, to punishment. That took bravery, but in this country there is one more element of complexity to the story.

Here we are not *just* citizens, we are, at least indirectly, citizen-rulers. We are not only subject to human law, we help write it. It is an incredible gift, and an staggering responsibility: the matter of justice, the standard to which God holds the nations, is partly in our own hands.

That is why it is so important that we get this right.

Our hands are the ones which will have blood on them, or will help pull one another up from the mud.

Our hands can be calloused with the work of pulling the reins of our nation toward greater goodness, or they can be soft and clean, comfortably washed of the whole difficult business and letting things happen as others decide.

There is power in our hands, and so it is crucial that those hands be folded humbly in prayer before anything else.

There is something both disturbingly unsettling and fantastic about how the United States of America defines itself. Built upon a legacy of slaveholders who claimed that “all men are created equal,”⁷ we, the present stewards of this nation, are tied to both of those things: sinful hypocrisy and lofty aspiration. Indeed, “all men are created equal” might capture with astonishing accuracy the project of doing justice as deeply flawed human beings. In its ambitious cry for justice combined with its blindness on the subject of whether “all men” really means *all* men and its overly comfortable linguistic ambiguity about whether “all *men*” actually includes everyone, this flawed yet beautiful statement in the end embodies in itself the sentiment we need to remember applies to us always: “Reformed and always reforming.”⁸

Reformed and always reforming is ever our lot upon this earth. And so echoing, in a way, the grace of God, who “loved us while we were yet sinners,”⁹ and was not content to leave us mired and enslaved in sin, our love of nation must be of the kind that sees it with the same high aspirational imagination as its founders did but is not content to let it cling to their old sins nor the new ones of our own day.

⁷ From the United States Declaration of Independence, mostly written by Thomas Jefferson, and adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776.

⁸ This phrase in one form or another has been used throughout the Reformed branch of the church, which includes Presbyterianism, as a kind of motto or goal, naming our need for constantly being reshaped by the Spirit and turned ever more aright and back to God, since the late 1600s.

⁹ From Romans 5:8 (*Revised Standard Version*).

Opening our eyes to the magnitude of our responsibility, if our citizenship in a voting nation is truly to be made subject to our duty to faithful Christian discipleship, is an overwhelming thing, though. How are we to know the right way? Who are we to know and bring about justice? How are we to find the courage, or the will? In the scripture for today Paul calls himself “wretched,”¹⁰ recognizing how much he is caught in the inability to do what is truly right, and this is indeed the human plight. For we surely can see some of the failures of others who have taken up their place as citizens and rulers of this nation, but we are made of no different stuff than they are. But Paul also knows the answer: “Who will rescue me...?”¹¹ he asks? “Thanks be to God,” he declares in answer, “through Jesus Christ our Lord!”¹²

Jesus himself makes the offer. Maybe we are no wise rulers, but Jesus speaks of revealing things not to the wise anyway. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” he invites, “and I will give you rest.”¹³ It is true of our citizenship as it is true of everything else: bring it to the foot of Jesus. No human wisdom alone can be our guide; it is only in him that we can move forward with hope and assurance, knowing that we do many things wrong, but humbly listening for correction on them all, meanwhile living always in joyful hope for that greater kingdom to come, for one day we will be relieved when all the imperfect and damaged works of our own hands are torn down and salvation comes, not from them nor dependent upon them, but from the glorious restoration of all things in the coming of Jesus Christ.

So then, let us pray for that day: Thy kingdom come, O Lord; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.¹⁴ And until that day, take our heavy burdens and make them light; teach us, give us rest, and make us wholly yours. Amen.

¹⁰ See Romans 7:24 (*NRSV*).

¹¹ Continuing Romans 7:24 (*NRSV*).

¹² Romans 7:25 (*NRSV*).

¹³ Matthew 11:28 (*NRSV*).

¹⁴ Paraphrasing again the Lord’s Prayer, found in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.