

Allegiance

© The Rev. Marilyn Hedgpeth
Sunday, November 25, 2018
Christ the King Sunday
2 Sam 23:1-7 / Rev. 1:4b-8 / John 18: 33-37

Thought #1: A few weeks ago, my husband was a guest at

our four-year-old grandson's preschool in Charlotte,

where he read *The Little Engine That Could* with Spencer,

danced a "freeze dance" with the class,

and observed with amazement as that little dickens held the flag

and led everyone in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

None of us had any idea that Spencer could say the Pledge of Allegiance!

And he said it well, and pronounced all of the words correctly, even "indivisible".

But when Hedge came home and told me about it, I have to admit that

I received his news with mixed emotions.

On one hand, I'm thrilled that Spencer's language skills are improving day by day;

that he can memorize and recite complex scripts;

and that he is in a place of learning that is teaching him about good citizenship.

But the image of my little blonde-haired, blue-eyed grandson holding a flag

and pledging allegiance to a national entity, even our own national entity,

gives me pause, I have to admit, because I have a healthy fear of
vowing allegiance to any principality, power, or person

other than the Lord our God, whom we are called to love first,

"with all of our heart, and with all of our soul, and with all of our strength",

as ancient Israel's primary declaration of faith, *The Shema*, commands.

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts,”

The Shema continues.

“Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home

and when you walk along the road, when you lie down

and when you get up.” (Deut. 6: 4-7)

I wonder how we could do a better job of conveying our primary allegiance

to our children, without imposing it upon them,

yet offering it to them as an allegiance that is not from this world;

that is “awed to heaven, and rooted in earth”, as Walter Brueggemann would say.

(Brueggemann’s book of prayers is entitled *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*.)

Thought #2: On this last Sunday of the liturgical year,

we are asked to make a leap from Black Friday to a Good Friday text:

the prelude to Jesus’ crucifixion, as Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate

by Jewish leaders in hope that Pilate will condemn Jesus to death,

which they legally are unable to do.

What must Christians have been thinking in 1925 when they felt the need

to insert into our liturgical calendars a Christ this King holy day

in the wake of the war to end all wars?

As a rising tide of secularism was sweeping across Europe,

was there something about the ebb and flow of Kings and Kaisers and Czars

that made them feel a pressing need for the Church

to pledge allegiance to a higher sovereign?

Perhaps it was such wariness that inspired Irish poet William Butler Yeats in 1919

to pen his ominous poem *The Second Coming*, about “things falling apart”, about “mere anarchy loosed on the world”, and “innocence (being) drowned”. And is there something today about the rise and fall of Presidents, Potentates, Princes and Popes that might make us feel a similar need to reaffirm our primary loyalty?

Thought #3

In this Good Friday text from John’s Gospel,

Jesus’ opponents bring him from the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, to the praetorium where Pontius Pilate presides as governor of the Roman province of Judea.

Jesus, the one who has summoned fishermen, friends and mere acquaintances to “follow me”, now is summoned, himself, by Pilate into his chambers for a little tete-a-tete.

“Tell me,” Pilate says, “Are you really king of the Jews? Is that your true identity?”

To which Jesus deflects his question and asks for clarification:

“Is that your idea, or did others put those words into your mouth?”

And Pilate responds with a question concerning his own identity, “Hey, am I a Jew?”

There is something about Jesus, here and elsewhere, that is so authentic, so transparent, so non-defensive, so revelatory of what is true, that it makes people drop their façades of acculturation to stand exposed

before his holiness in their own authenticity, good or bad.

It happens to the Pharisee Nicodemus, who, upon meeting Jesus in the dark of night,

lets down his facade as a knowledgeable rabbinic teacher

to stand before Jesus as a curious, inquisitive pupil seeking spiritual truth
about the kingdom of God and heavenly things

beyond his accrued learning and knowing (John 3: 1-21).

It happens likewise to a Samaritan woman, who, upon meeting Jesus

at a well in the high-noon light of day, drops her façade

of marital security to reveal to Jesus that she is

scarred by five marriages gone bad, yet still an unbroken seeker

of higher spiritual truth (John 4: 1-30).

And Pilate, too, struggles to not let slip his mask of imperial power

in the dazzling light of Jesus' purity, realizing, on one hand,

that Jesus has no place being on trial

for exercising his "kingly" powers by riding into town on a donkey and

by stooping like a servant to wash the feet of others;

while on the other hand, realizing that Jesus' humble demeanor and benevolence

is his threatening power.

And the authentic Pilate is exposed before Jesus in the fear that he harbors:

that by releasing Jesus, as he rightfully should,

he will displease the Jews whom he governs, lose control over them,

and thereby become ineffectual in his role as governor.

How many of us have the courage to admit this same tension in our lives,

between doing the right thing which honors our primary allegiance to God,

or doing the thing that popular allegiance demands of us?

The Westminster Confession of Faith, written during the Protestant Reformation in 17th century England declares that "God alone is Lord of the conscience", free from anything contrary to God's Word.

(Westminster Confession of faith, 6.109)

I wonder what would happen if we dared avail ourselves to the transforming power of our humble, benevolent king, Jesus, who loves us for our truth, "just the way we are", as Mr. Rodgers would say?

Thought #4

To me, the best line in this dialogue between Pilate and Jesus

is the clarifying statement which Jesus twice asserts:

"My kingdom is not from this world...my kingdom is not from here."

It's a haunting line, as Jesus has been witnessing non-stop

to the Kingdom of God ever since he rose dripping from the baptismal waters of the Jordan.

We don't talk much about kings and kingdoms in our modern vernacular.

We don't live under a monarchy, or within a feudal system of government.

But we do understand the concept of "authority", and it is helpful, perhaps

to substitute that word for Jesus' claim about his own allegiance.

"My authority is not from this world...my authority is not from here."

My marching orders do not come from this world.

In other words, Jesus' authority derives not from his earthly pedigree or station, nor from his earthly possessions, nor from his earthly base of support.

His authority is from heaven above; from God; from loving and serving the Lord God
with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength;
from dispossessing and divesting himself of things;
from relinquishing control and power over people and events;
and from being authentic to his calling to embody neighbor-love
and stooping-to-serve care-giving in all of his relationships.

That's where Jesus' authority comes from; not from here, but from above.

Another word we might substitute here for clarity would be the word "values".

"My values are not from this world...my values are not from here."

The values which Jesus embodies in word and deed are God's kingdom values
of justice, righteousness, mercy, kindness, humility, generosity, faithfulness,
compassion, self-giving love, welcome and peace.

I don't often find myself quoting Jesus, but Jesus' words have a way of inscribing
themselves upon our hearts so that they often spring from
our lips unexpectedly.

A few weeks ago when I was attending a meeting of the Alumnae Board
at my alma mater, one of the other alums asked me
if I would mind submitting my career information and background
for a data base that they are assimilating for students,
to help place them in internships where they might prepare
to be "competitive in the global marketplace" .

And I laughed, as these very words of Jesus impulsively tumbled from my lips:

"Well, you know, my kingdom is not of this world; I'm not very

competitive in the global marketplace!”

I didn't mean to be flip or dismissive, but I did want to raise a question

about the values which they were trying to cultivate in their graduates.

I hope that these kingdom values are what higher education is working towards,

even as they prepare students to step into the global marketplace.

I hope it's a both/and endeavor.

So, I gave them the information they requested, and I truly hope

that some students will want to talk with me about living a life or finding a career

where justice, righteousness, mercy, kindness, humility,

generosity, faithfulness, compassion, self-giving love, welcome and peace

become “awed from heaven and rooted in earth”

in their creeds and careers.

Thought #5

And finally, how do we keep Christ the King Sunday from being an anachronism

harking from a prior time when lives were governed by kings and kingdoms;

or from being an liturgical outlier photo-bombed into our busy holiday selfies

somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas?

And the bridge that pops into my mind is a Christmas carol about a good king.

Legend or history, it tells of Bohemian King Wencelas and his page,

braving the cold of winter on the day after Christmas, the Feast of St. Stephen,

to bring food and firewood to a poor peasant. We'll sing it in a minute.

But I think it's interesting because it attests to the subversive power

of a good ruler, of a good leader, even of a good follower,

walking in the way of Christ, our King,
who derives his or her authority and values from above;
awed to heaven by loving the Lord God, with all his or her heart,
soul, mind and strength;
yet rooted in earth, by many practical acts of going-the-extra-mile neighbor-love
done with humility and benevolence in the way of Jesus.

Christ, our King: his way of love was hidden in great and small embodiments
and enactments of the God's kingdom values, no matter the day or weather.

Christ, our King: his way of power was to align his will with God's will,
and then to make it manifest on earth, as it is in heaven,
in words and deeds of faithfulness and self-giving love.

To him, to Christ our Good King, we owe our primary allegiance, our praise
our chants, our high thanksgiving on this day, now and forevermore. Amen.

- Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
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