

“The Unification of Faith and State”

II Chronicles 7:14

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July 4th falling on a Sunday poses problems for preachers, no matter which tack you take, it's rarely smooth sailing. Some will embrace the national holiday and the results can be a celebration that may not look much like a worship service at all. That has one set of problems, for example, the preacher saying something that would jeopardize the church's non-profit status. Other preachers will completely ignore it. That has another set of problems. For example, if that is done, a major part of life, the country in which we live, is separated from our faith which is to guide, inform and transform our whole lives. Still other preachers will look at our American Independence Day in the context of our faith, and yet, this too has its problems. However, this is the tack we're going to take this morning, hoping that we can tend the tensions of the potential problems.

The most obvious of those tensions is people's political perspectives are firmly held. Perspectives shaped and nurtured throughout a lifetime and over generations. I remember taking a historical tour of the late 1770's in Canada with my young children and the guide describing an “uprising down to the south” being led by a “rebellious young general named George Washington.” To which my son asked me, “Is that our George Washington?” Most Americans have a favorable view of our first president, but all around the world, throughout our nation and in any congregation, including ours, people have different perspectives on most every subject; from history, to politics, to religion. If you want an interesting discussion, bring up history. If you want to have a heated discussion bring up politics. If you want to have a hot discussion bring up religion. If you want to have a “wild fire” bring up politics and religion together!

One of our nation's founding principles “separation of church and state” implicit in the first amendment was explained in a 1789 paper by James Madison, our fourth president, a signer of our Constitution, and the one who our beloved city is named. Madison said, “Congress should not establish a religion, and enforce the legal observation of it by law, nor compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience....” In their seeking independence from a country where an official religion was declared, and was problematic from their perspective, in the newly forming country our fore founders were clear that there was to be no established “religion;” but, what is less clear is the separation of “faith and state.” In fact, there is evidence of the unification of faith and state in the founding documents and in every day reminders now as our money witnesses, “In God we Trust” and things as familiar as this statement in our Pledge of Allegiance, “one nation under God.”

These ideals continue to challenge every generation of Americans. Driving down Gammon, recently, I followed a car that had a red, white and blue bumper sticker that said, “God is not a Republican.” A week or so later, I was on Mineral Point on my way to the church, again I saw a red, white and blue bumper sticker, but this one said, “God is not a Democrat.” Within a four mile radius, there is an ongoing bumper sticker battle representing in a small way a much larger war. Sarah Palin on the cover of a recent Newsweek with the caption, “Saint Sarah” energized some and baffled others. We have faithful people on every point of the political spectrum from the right to the left. “Religion” may be separated out of politics, but not faith. Faith is a part of every aspect of our lives that is important to us.

So what guidance do we have to living our faith in challenging political times? The Bible, this word of God, can be made to say just about anything. In it, we have the witness of political parties overcoming others. We have the invasions and occupations of countries by other countries. We have religious leaders helping the state and we have religious leaders rebelling against those in power. Our text from II Chronicles is a part of the summary of 1,000 years of the Israelites story from their peak of power in the United Kingdom under Saul, David and Solomon to the kings of Judah to the Babylonian Exile to the hope of Cyrus the Great allowing the exiles to return home to Jerusalem. Each of these events had major political as well as faith implications. The verse we read was one word of guidance for the Israelites that can also guide us. “If my people, who are called by my name humble themselves and pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Because of our different perspectives, this verse can be one of controversy or one of promise, or something in between. Some have the perspective, it is only for the Israelites then and there...in the past. Others have the perspective; there is a word for us in the present. Still others have yet another perspective; it is a word for not just nations but the world, a word for a future with hope. From a faith perspective, let us look at the potential word for us today.

Although it is short, this verse is packed with guidance, possibilities and promise. It is a conditional statement between God and people of God. It begins, “If my people who are called by my name...” We are people called by God to be in relationship with God and others. Accepting that this word can speak to us today, we are given four different things to do. First, we are to humble ourselves. Commands to be humble and warnings against pride are prevalent throughout Scripture. Perhaps this is one of the greatest challenges of being faithful as individuals and as a nation living with the unification of faith and state. Challenging for more reasons than we can name, but let me lift a few. How can we be accepting of our gifts, embracing our opportunities and confident in our very being while being humble? How do we avoid masking pride with false humility? How does one lead with humility? How does one follow with humility? How do we humbly discern when to lead and when to follow? Humble ourselves, that’s the first thing we are to do.

The second thing is we are to pray. Prayer is something we hear a lot about but many find it difficult. Then if we can and do pray, what are we to pray for, as individuals and as a nation? Our answers to that question would cover the range of our different perspectives of needs and wants everywhere on that spectrum from the left to the right. So perhaps the most open ended prayer is simply “Lord, help us” being prayed with the third guidance in our hearts and minds.

The third guidance, the third thing we are called to do is to seek God’s face. Seeking God means that our agendas, political and otherwise, take a backseat. Unfortunately, we have seen evidence throughout history when it doesn’t, resulting in holy wars in the name of God destroying individuals and nations. We are to look for God’s guidance and grace, God’s presence, “God’s face” in every situation, and sometimes in spite of circumstances.

The fourth thing this short, powerful verse tells us to do is to turn from our wicked ways. Scripture tells us that God’s ways are not our ways and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. Our “wicked ways” as individuals or as a country, may or may not be obvious but if we are doing something in word or deed that is against the laws of love, peace and justice we are to change our ways.

Those four things are the conditional, the if, if we humble ourselves, pray, seek God, and turn from the ways that are not of God, *then*, **then**, God will hear and heal. The cover article of a recent Time magazine was “The Broken States of America: How the financial crisis of the states affects all of us.” But we all know that brokenness goes beyond the financial crisis and beyond our borders. We know of broken systems, broken treaties, broken promises, and broken hearts. This conditional verse offers a word of help and a word of hope for people of faith. If we humble ourselves, pray, seek God and turn from the ways that are not of God, *then*, **then** God will hear us and heal our land, and the lands of all.

Two days ago, I was standing at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where two hundred and thirty four years ago, on this day, our Declaration of Independence was signed. Typically we focus on the first part of the declaration, with its most memorable second paragraph, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness;” forgetting the last and longer part is a list of grievances against the British King as the colonists were indeed forging independence from that foreign rule. In the years since then, as a country we’ve had much to celebrate and much to regret. At almost any point in our history one political party or another would have a list of grievances against the current ruling party in power.

No matter where we fall on the spectrum of left to right or right to left; if we can approach our current “grievances:” the slow economic recovery, healthcare, the gulf oil spill, immigration, unemployment, and on and on, if we can approach these grievances with humility, prayer, seeking God and turning from ways that are hurtful, then our unification of faith and state will have opportunity to make a difference in our nation. We are a nation of church separated from state, but not faith. Our faith is integral to our lives because it is beyond nationalism, to our working together for peace and justice around the world recognizing that other people love their lands as much as we love ours and Christ’s call to love is beyond sea to shining sea! Amen!