

Sermon: Pentecost IV: Proper 9

The Rev. Mike Wernick

July 6, 2014

Year A

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalm 145:8-15

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

An Episcopal Bishop once said... that a priest is an organizer of chaos... a steward of the mystery... and a bearer of the uncomfortable message... someone else once said that preaching the Gospel with offending anyone... is like walking a tight... it's quite the balancing act... and so just two days after July 4... when we consider who Jesus was talking about then... and who it applies to today... well... it can seem unpatriotic...

On March 9, 2003... best as I can figure... ten days before the invasion of Iraq... at a concert in London... Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks... said to the concert crowd: *we don't want this war... this violence... and we're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas...* as they were...

The British audience responded positively... but in the US... less than two years after 9/11... when we were still reeling from that loss... and experiencing a heightened sense of nationalism... when saying almost anything against this country was taboo... those comments set off a fire storm... the band was boycotted... the musicians were verbally assaulted by talk-show conservatives... their albums were discarded in public protest... and they received death threats...

Natalie exercised her first amendment rights... she spoke truth to power... she was like an insurgent who spoke against Empire... and there was a price to pay...

Along with freedom of speech... one of the founding principles of this country... was freedom from religiously-influenced oppression... from forcing one group... into accepting the religious convictions of another...

Last week's ruling by the Supreme Court determined that the Affordable Care Act cannot force a "closely held company" to cover certain types of contraceptives... the government couldn't prove that the requirement was the "least burdensome" way... to avoid interfering with religious convictions... and the court *emphasized* that this decision did not mean... that companies could refuse to cover other things... such as blood transfusions... we'll have to see whether any companies owned by Jehovah's Witnesses bring a suit about that...

But about a month ago... when President Obama could not get the Employment Non-Discrimination Act through Congress... which would prohibit discrimination in hiring and employment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity... when he couldn't even get Congress to vote on it... he said that he would sign an *executive order* barring *federal contractors* from discriminating on this basis... and then... only two days after last week's Hobby Lobby decision... fourteen prominent faith leaders... asked the White House to create a *religious exemption* from his planned executive order... so that those with strongly felt religious convictions... could choose not to hire LGBT people... have the religiously motivated floodgates been opened in a country based... at least partly... in religious freedom...

About three months ago... Bureau of Land Management agents tried to move cattle belonging to rancher Clive Bundy... according to CNN... Bundy has avoided paying federal grazing fees for 20 years and owes about \$1M... but these federal officials were threatened by heavily armed militia groups... exercising their second amendment rights... which gathered from across the country and came to Bundy's side... and threatened to shoot the feds...

On July 1... protestors in Murietta, CA... refused to allow about 140 Central American Immigrants... being carried on three busses... from being processed at a local facility... they chanted "Deport! Deport!" and "Impeach Obama!"... almost like Crucify! Crucify!... and the busses were forced to go to a different facility about eighty miles away...

I'm not a lawyer... and don't pretend to understand all the intricacies of immigration law... but what seems clear is that the rhetoric around this has become ugly... even though the Torah... the Gospels... and the Qur'an... all talk about the imperative to welcome the stranger... but for whatever reasons... Congress has refused to vote on comprehensive immigration reform... and in response to that... President Obama has said he'll move ahead alone...

There are other issues... like background checks for gun purchases... that have gained national attention in recent months... but what I think they all have in common is an unprecedented increase in individualism... and a disregard for authority... as Phyllis Tickle wrote in the book we read... people are asking *Where is our authority now*... and it's also reflected by something theologian and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann recently said... he said that the Gospel has gotten all tangled up... with a sense of white... western... entitlement... so let's go to today's Gospel...

Jesus asks... what's this generation like... and he answers... it's like stubborn children who won't play together... if we play the flute... you won't dance... if we wail... you won't mourn along with us...

John came neither eating or drinking... but you didn't like what he said... you didn't want to repent as he urged... so you dismissed him by saying he had a demon... The Son of Man came eating and drinking... but you didn't like who he associated with... you didn't want to accept his teaching... so you dismissed him by calling him a glutton and a drunkard...

Theologian John Shea wrote: nothing can please these people... they respond negatively to every invitation... what they do best... is to sit in the marketplace and make judgments... fabricating reasons... smokescreens... and camouflages to justify their paralysis... the real reason they refuse the invitation to change... is that they are

the privileged... the way the system is set up... sets them up... they're protecting their status... holding on tightly to what they have...

Shea continues... but Wisdom... God's Truth... is not vindicated by the reception it receives from people who will neither wail nor dance... Wisdom is justified by the things it does... so don't gauge Jesus by how this generation *avoids* his invitation and *judges* his actions... look at his deeds themselves...

And then there's Paul's convoluted letter to the Romans... in which he laments... that he does the things he doesn't want to do... and doesn't do the things he wants to do... he asks... who will rescue me from this body of death...

The Rev. Heidi Haverkamp wrote: a professor of mine liked to say that until recently... much of human thought was influenced by the fact that people did not have refrigerators... you see... food is extremely perishable... and in ancient kitchens... meat... bread... and produce lasted only so long before they became *really kind of* disgusting and inedible... human bodies were much the same... there were no antibiotics... emergency rooms... or dentists... people got scars and lesions... lost fingers... toes... and teeth... they died from what we now consider minor infections and illnesses...

We're protected from physical decay and death in a way that Paul and his neighbors were not... we have well-lit produce sections... with blemish-free fruits and vegetables... and in our culture... we're surrounded by images and examples of perfection... but perfection is impossible for human beings...

Paul showed us... that the true breakthrough in learning to be Christian... comes not when we succeed at perfection... but when we realize that *we will always fail*... Paul calls out the sinner... cowering inside us... afraid to be discovered and shamed... afraid that if we show our imperfections... we'll be thrown away like rotted fruit...

And Empire really... deeply dislikes failure... perhaps in *this* generation... there are leaders... who so aggressively reject any notion of failure... that they're like stubborn children... who for reasons they devise... remain focused on smokescreens and camouflages... to justify their inactivity and paralysis... and drag their feet when it comes to social justice issues...

In the Gospel... although Jesus' reassuring words... about easy yokes and light burdens... may encourage us to think we've got it made... to think that all we have to do is accept Jesus as our Savior... and we'll just go to heaven... be excused from helping to create Heaven on Earth... but for ancient rabbis... their yoke *was* their teaching... and in v. 29 Jesus says... *learn from me*... Jesus asks us to continue to learn... and I think the more we learn... the more we incarnate Wisdom... the lighter our burden is... and I believe that this is the real freedom to which we're called...

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice... and the United States has done *so much* to bend that arc... I appreciate that we do what we can... when we can... to protect the innocent from murderous dictators... that we bring food and medical care to those affected by natural disasters... that we stand up for the rights of the marginalized... in these things we're living out the Gospel...

But I also grieve that collectively... corporately... the body of Christ doesn't always do what it wants to do... and sometimes does what it doesn't want to do...

When we celebrate those good things in this country which reflect God's Wisdom... I would certainly pray God Bless America... but I'd also add... God Bless All Nations... we all sure need it. Amen.