

February 12, 2017
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 119:1-8
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

From glee to despair, there exists in the United States a wide range of strong feelings about the current administration in Washington. Nonetheless, there is at least one thing that we can all agree on: the American political scene is currently one of constant surprises. Our familiar two-party system—stodgy, perhaps, but also, as it turns out, comfortingly predictable—has been jolted sideways by an anti-politician who has taken a match to the old political playbook.

Despite our differences, there are still many things Americans have in common. We have been shaped by many of the same inherited narratives and shared experiences. Some of these narratives and experiences persist through many generations: for example, think of George Washington crossing the Potomac during the Revolutionary War. Others are more limited in time: one has to be at least my age to care that the first steps on the moon and the muddy dancing at Woodstock took place within a month of each other in the summer of 1969. The result is a sort of American cultural religion, one that is both statically traditional and dynamically evolutionary, one that has its own rituals, values, rules, and expectations.

On our American cultural religion calendar, last Sunday was one of the most important days of the year. Countless pilgrims assembled to witness the final stretch of a journey toward a mythic prize. The pageantry included colorful clothing, choreographed processions, musical interludes, and crowd participation. Storytellers provided narratives about heroes and villains, brotherhood and betrayal, fall and redemption, perseverance and victory. Those who couldn't attend in person watched with the aid of magical transmissions, friends and feasts at hand. Yes, it was Super Bowl Sunday.

Super Bowl Sunday is always a pretty big deal. Just over half of Americans watched at least a portion of the game; the average audience throughout the game was about one-third of Americans.¹ I was not among them. Despite my ability to toss around football *lingo*, I am completely uninterested in the Super Bowl. Actually, that's not quite right. I *am* interested in the Super Bowl, but as a cultural indicator. This year, my pre-game attention was caught most intensely by the news of a survey showing that: first, "One-quarter (25%) of Americans believe God plays a role in determining the outcome of sporting events," presumably including the Super Bowl, and second, "nearly half (49%) of the public believes God rewards athletes *who have faith* with good health and success."² Note that, "In comparison, *more* than one-quarter (28%) of Americans believe God played a major role in determining the outcome of the 2016 election."³

Before I saw that article, it had not occurred to me that God is interested enough in the Super Bowl to choose a winner. I began to imagine “the old man” God sitting at a card table, the Super Bowl playing field laid out before him like an oversize chessboard. Wearing traditional white robe and halo, he is leaning over, his long beard resting on his lap. Instead of kings, knights and pawns, there are quarterbacks, receivers, and linemen. If God does care about the Super Bowl, then apparently God especially loves Patriots quarterback and now five-time Super Bowl winner Tom Brady. This despite what I overheard one Day School kindergartner say on Monday morning: “The Patriots only win because they cheat.”

The Patriots last won the Super Bowl in 2015. In that game, the Patriots sealed the win by intercepting a Seattle Seahawks pass on the Patriots one-yard line. If you don’t know understand that means, all you need to know is that, like this year, the game had a dramatic ending. Later Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson said that God spoke to him immediately after his pass was intercepted. He described the experience this way: “God says to me, ‘I’m using you ... I want to see *how you respond*. But most importantly, I want *them* to see how you respond [emphasis mine].”⁴ My response is, what about the *other fifty players* in the game? What about the other hundred-plus million people *watching* the game? Did God throw the game because of ONE person? Is the belief that God bases a group decision on ME the *height of narcissism*? Or, is it the *epitome of faith*—the wholly complete personal relationship with God?

“Personal relationship with God” is not a phrase that Episcopalians commonly use. It sounds way too evangelical for those of us who prefer to keep our elbows at our sides when we sing. But if we wait out our knee-jerk reaction and take a slow, deep breath, well, I dare say, a “personal relationship with God” is exactly what most of us want, even if we hesitate use those words, and even if the idea of saying that makes us feel as uncomfortable as if we were lost in a strange town without a smartphone. If we can admit that much, there’s an even tougher follow-up question: *How* do we develop a personal relationship with God?

Today’s Gospel reading is part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.⁵ In Matthew’s Gospel, one of the first things Jesus does after being baptized is preach the Sermon on the Mount. After baptism, Jesus goes into the wilderness, begins preaching, calls his first disciples, and then begins curing “every disease and every sickness among the people.”⁶ All that happens in one chapter. The following Sermon on the Mount is *three* chapters. As generally described, those three chapters summarize Jesus’ moral teachings. Apparently, when it comes to morals, Jesus is a very long-winded preacher.

Morals is another word that has the power to make Episcopalians feel squeamish. For example, the word makes me think of Jerry Falwell’s organization, the Moral Majority. Their agenda never seemed particularly Christian to me, but they were successful, and Falwell helped coopt the word *morals* for the fundamentalists. Still, I wonder whether they could have done it if we hadn’t let them. Now, maybe we have been handed an excellent opportunity to reclaim it for ourselves.

First, a definition: according to Meriam-Webster, *Morals* “describes one's particular values concerning what is right and what is wrong.”⁷ Each of us exists in relationship with other humans and with all parts of God’s creation. Each of us continuously makes decisions about how we interact with all that. We often make those decision unconsciously. One’s morals are our own personal rules of engagement. We need them as we maneuver through our lives; they influence our direction, even when we are on autopilot.

Over the last couple of decades, mainline Christianity has lost members and social capital. Our congregations have changed with the times, or not. Churches like this one no longer preach fire and brimstone; we avoid themes of compliance and judgment and consequences. We left those themes behind because, for so long, they had been prioritized over themes of love and kindness and compassion. But in our word reclamation project, we need to remember: the prioritization of love and kindness and compassion is itself a moral stance.

Since before I was ordained, I’ve pondered how the church can find and project a new voice of moral authority. I recently discovered that some church leaders are trying to do just that. Friday before last, several of us went to Yale Divinity School to hear the Rev. Dr. William Barber. A link to the video of that event is in last week’s Enews, and I highly recommend you watch it. Dr. Barber is a church pastor and president of the North Carolina NAACP.

Four years ago Barber began leading a movement called Moral Mondays: a series of weekly protests, and sometimes civil disobedience, at the North Carolina legislature. Barber contends that our country is in a predictable era of backlash, the result of progress on issues of racial justice. That sounds right. America *has* come a long way on justice issues regarding not only race but also women and sexuality and immigration and more—America has come a long way, even if there is much work yet to be done. There is more to be done particularly when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable among us—for example, those who lack adequate food or healthcare. Quite powerfully, Barber called out called out these inadequacies as moral failures. He named them not just *wrong*, but *sinful*.

Let’s return to the Sermon on the Mount, which earlier I described as a summary of Jesus’ moral teachings. Another writer this week described it as “a theology of resistance.”⁸ That makes sense. Morals and resistance must go hand in hand. What would Jesus do? I think he was pretty clear about the answer to that question. God is not chess master and we are not pawns. God is our source, our guide, and our comfort. Jesus the Christ was God’s humanly physical manifestation: God as flesh and bone, God as eyes and ears, God as hands and feet. God reached out to the people of first-century Palestine, and God reaches out to us today. As we follow Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can’t help but develop a personal relationship with God.

If God is in the Super Bowl, I don’t think it’s to manipulate the players on the field or the balls in the air. It think it’s more subtle than that. For example, despite widespread political rudeness, the Super Bowl demonstrates that the American public still values fairness and sportsmanship. Also, the Super Bowl draws viewers from across all demographic categories. You’ve all heard it said that Sunday mornings are the most segregated part of the week. It just may be that Super Bowl Sunday night is the *least* segregated part of the *year*. These are excellent things Americans share.

Today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount is about behaving with intention and integrity. It gives us something to think about in this era of change. We are in it for the short game and for the long. Yes, the old political playbook is on fire. *We* can help write a new one, one in which *everyone* is a winner. From this and more, we take heart from our personal relationships with God, with hope that our moral resistance will take hold.

Notes

¹ The 2017 Super Bowl drew an average viewership of 111 million and a total viewership of 172 million, according as reported by *USA Today* online at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2017/02/06/super-bowl-li-falcons-patriots-tv-rating-fox/97546162/> (accessed February 11, 2017). On the day of the game, the U.S. population was 325,500 according to Worldometers online, available at <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/us-population/> (accessed February 11, 2017).

² Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, "One-Quarter Say God will Determine the Super Bowl's Winner—but Nearly Half Say God Rewards Devout Athletes," PRRI, available online at <http://www.prii.org/research/poll-super-bowl-women-sports-god-athletes-marijuana/> (accessed February 11, 2017).

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/russell-wilson-says-god-spoke-to-him-explained-super-bowl-interception/>

⁵ The Sermon on the Mount is contained in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the Gospel of Matthew.

⁶ Matthew 4:23, NRSV.

⁷ "moral," *Miriam-Webster* dictionary online, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral> (accessed February 11, 2017).

⁸ Lindsey Paris-Lopez, "The Sermon on the Mount: A Theology of Resistance," Patheos, available online at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/teachingnonviolentatonement/2017/02/sermon-mount-theology-resistance/> (accessed February 11, 2017).