

July 3, 2016
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 9, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Kings 5:1-4
Psalm 30
Galatians 6:1-16
Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

For our readings on Sundays, we chunk the scriptures into digestible portions. This is mostly okay when it comes to the Gospels. Each of the four Gospels is basically a series of vignettes about Jesus. It's okay to hear just one, because it's part of an overall narrative that we know well. However, when it comes to the Epistles, the chunking can be misleading.

For several weeks we've been hearing from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Anytime one reads Paul, it's important to remember that Paul was *not* writing a systematic theology; Paul *was* writing to address a series of problems coming out of the young communities of Christ-followers. Each of Paul's letters is addressed to a particular group in response to a particular situation. Other people also had opinions about what was going on, but only Paul's opinions are so well preserved. Paul was a rhetorical master, articulate and persuasive, and he used his considerable writing skills to press his perspective on the issues at hand. In doing so, he left behind his interpretation of the meaning of the life and death of Jesus, one that has shaped Christianity ever since.

For several weeks now we've heard Paul talk in his Letter to the Galatians about flesh and spirit, about circumcision and the law. For Paul, what matters is not any rulebook for behavior. What matters is our relationship with God through Christ, a relationship that is nurtured through our engagement with others. Paul talks about life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit. I think it's important to understand that he's not dismissing our embodiment. Instead, he's calling upon us to use our embodiment not just for ourselves, but for the purposes to which God is constantly calling us. It's about bringing our whole selves to a life of attention and intention.

In today's Gospel, Jesus' instructions to his disciples are a pretty good summary of the Christian life. We have to take the list a bit out of order to hear Jesus' core charge: cure the sick, while proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He also offers some extra instructions. First, remember that you're stepping out ahead of Jesus, paving the way for him to follow. Second, though it's risky, you'll need little more than the power Jesus has given you. Third, do what you can where you can, graciously accepting whatever gratitude is offered. Fourth, don't let success go to your head in this world, and instead be grateful for your ultimate reward.

About six years ago, my father had a severe stroke. He had severe left-side paralysis and needed a lot of help, but his sweet nature and good humor remained largely unaffected. About three weeks after the stroke, I was in Louisiana for a visit. Almost to a person, his caregivers were unfailingly kind and affectionate, amazingly so, considering how difficult their *jobs* are and how little appreciated *they* are. Almost to a person, his caregivers were African American. One morning, Pop's caregivers had cleaned him up and transferred him to a wheelchair in preparation for his morning trip to physical therapy. With two of them still in the room, Pop said, "This is the Kingdom of Heaven right here, surrounded by all these angels." It's at such moments that I realize I have a lot to learn about living a Christian life. It's at such moments that I realize this learning will come through human interactions—through giving generously and receiving graciously, through the understanding that we heal and are healed, through being and hearing the heralds proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has indeed come near.

Tomorrow is American Independence Day. Independence Day always gets me thinking about the relationship between *God* and *nation*, especially when it's a presidential election year. Despite our constitutional freedom of religion, it seems that presidential nominees must still be Christian. Few people are able to temper Donald Trump's bluster, but apparently even he has yielded to the need to profess Jesus as Lord. It reminds me of a photograph a friend showed me a few years ago, of a front-lawn nativity scene in the Missouri countryside. The nativity scene was constructed of plywood that had been cut into shapes and painted. In it, Mary and Joseph looked pretty much like usual. But the Baby Jesus was swaddled in an American flag.

While our quest for justice can be supported by the action of the state, we should remember that the Church has been involved in some pretty miserable national failures. For example, the Church silently accepted and even actively supported the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. These examples would seem to suggest that, even in America, independence is not always for everyone. Or that freedom might be defined as the right to take what you can, from whomever you can. I think we're wise to hesitate before we wrap Jesus in an American flag, because the results might be bad for America, and they might even be bad for Christians.

As we celebrate this July 4th, rather than celebrating America as a Christian nation, let's celebrate America as a nation in which we are free to be Christians. As we consider what it means to use our Christian freedom, we might go back to the collect for the day, which says this: "O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection . . ." This particular collect originated in a book called the Leonine Sacramentary. A sacramentary is a book for priests containing the rites associated with celebrating the mass and other church services. The Leonine Sacramentary is the oldest known such book. The one existing manuscript was written in the seventh century.¹ Christians have been praying that prayer for a long time, for some twelve hundred years longer than America has been a nation.

America didn't invent Christianity, but Americans can live as Christians. One author has this to say about the readings for today:

The root of the Hebrew word for compassion . . . means womb. Originally, compassion referred to the deep love and empathy a mother has for her children and the accompanying love and empathy experienced by those who have shared the same womb. Jesus replaced the holiness code admonition, “You must be holy just as God is holy,” with the Kingdom code, “You must be compassionate just as your Heavenly Father is compassionate.” In Jesus’ day, much of society was determined by that holiness orientation, which, of course, led to impatience with those who were not “holy.” But where the emphasis on holiness excluded many, Jesus’ focus on compassion embraced all: The womb that envelops us is stronger and greater than our sin or even justifiable divine impatience.²

To the litany of bad news that Julie recounted last week, this week we need to add extremist violence in Turkey and Bangladesh. In the face of the hopelessness that such news instills in us, the best remedy I can think of is to keep returning like a broken record to the word compassion. It is the value that binds together all people of faith— Christians and not, Americans and not. For us as Christians who happen to be Americans, that is the word we need to parrot over and over in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. To summarize what Jesus said in today’s Gospel reading: heal; lead the Kingdom; you’re ready; be gracious; be humble. Through compassion, we overcome those fleshly things that would separate us. Through compassion, we perceive the human angels around us, and we are human angels to others.

Notes

¹ “Liturgical Books,” in Catholic Encyclopedia, under “History of the Roman Liturgical Books,” Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09296a.htm> (accessed 3 July 2010).

² Ron Zorn, “Compassion, Patience, and the Womb of God,” in *Imaging the Word: And Arts and Lectionary Resource, Volume 1*, ed. Kenneth T. Lawrence (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1994), 231.