

Old Testament Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

New Testament Reading: Mark 6:1-13

Sermon: Covenant and Patriotism

Date: July5, 2009

OK, so it is the Fourth of July- yes, I know that the 4th was yesterday- but this is the closest Sunday to it and how many times do we really give ourselves the opportunity to talk about patriotism? I asked several kids- they didn't know what the word meant! Strange, isn't it? I bring this up because the whole notion of patriotism has gotten a black eye over the years. On one level, you could define patriotism as devotion to your country- who could have a problem with that? There is the logical outgrowth of that- if I am devoted to my country; I am not devoted to someone else's country- again, who could have a problem with that? feels sorta like adultery. If I am devoted to my county; if I owe allegiance to my country- then it follows that my country comes first- and that is what has some people up in arms. after 9/11. They tend to be the folks who ascribe to what some describe as a "black armband" view of history. That is the view that American History is little more than a *disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.*; something that we should apologize for. But the most important form of patriotism, the one that we rarely get around to talking about, because we get distracted with the "Black Armband" approach -is really the most important- for it defines patriotism as living up to our country's ideals. And if there was ever a time when our country needed us to live up to her ideals- it is now.

Let's just take a look at some of the challenges that we are facing. 1) Last week, after 6 years of the Iraqi war, US forces began to pull back, essentially succeeding in their original aims to get rid of a dictator, install an elected government and have the Iraqi security forces take control- all under very difficult circumstances. Along the way we learned again that we do not want to be the world's policeman- and the world doesn't want us as their policeman either! 2) after 30 years of a ME FIRST, I want it now economy- when the bottom fell out we found that all the flat screen TV, I pods and other stuff we just had to have didn't make us feel any better. 3) ME FIRST also lent itself to a damn the torpedoes approach to personal fulfillment- the moral anarchy that results when everyone is looking out for #1 hurts both people and community values. In short-

the heart of America's problems are just that- issues of the heart. Which – by the way is what brings us to our passages this morning; for they all deal with opportunities that present themselves and God empowering his people to act.

At first glance, our 2 Samuel passage doesn't seem especially illuminating. So the people of Israel crown David Kings- what's the big deal? It's all about the authority to act. Let me give you the back story.... After David slays Goliath, Saul makes good on his promise to marry David off to his daughter. David goes to Court- where he becomes best friends with Saul's son Jonathan. Over a period of time, David builds a military reputation, to the point where Saul fears that David might either supplant his son as successor or instigate a coup against himself! Saul chases David to southern Judea, where David recruits his own army, loyal to him. Several times David has an opportunity to kill Saul, but does not out of respect for Saul being the Lord's anointed. When the Philistines raid Israelite territory, Saul abandons chasing David to meet them. By this time it is clear that David's men are outnumbered by Saul's army- so David goes to the Philistine king Achish for protection. Achish is only too happy to have David- for he knows that this is going to be an irritant to Saul and sets up as a vassal in the border town of Ziklag. Saul and Jonathan meet the Philistines at Gilgal- and are killed. This sets up a power vacuum and David sees the opportunity. He knows what must be done- but characteristically- he seeks the Lord first- for guidance, for strength, for wisdom. Then he returns to Judea and convinces the Judeans to crown him as king. Meanwhile, one of Saul's surviving generals Abner installs Ishbaal, one of Saul's sons as King over Israel-. There are a series of civil wars- border raids, really- which David consistently wins. Abner is killed and Ishbaal is assassinated by his own people. Without a leader Israel sends a delegation to propose that David unite both Israel and Judea. He accepts and the first thing he does is conquer Jerusalem- which becomes his property by conquest- neutral territory from which to govern both Israel and Judea. David's story is one of bold action- once he saw the opportunities that God presented.

In Mark 6, authority to act is at the heart of both episodes: Jesus preaching at his hometown synagogue and the send out of the apostles. Mark sets up the contrast intestinally- to demonstrate that when God's people respond and act in faith, amazing things happen. I am sure that by now, everyone in that Nazareth synagogue had heard

about Jesus- about the healings, the exorcisms, even about bringing Jairus' daughter back from the dead! They must have looked forward to this, probably expecting a full scale dog and pony show. But Jesus does not oblige. He preaches with authority- which is what they should have expected- but instead, they are astounded! They react with their version of "don't get all high and mighty with us- we knew you when!" They came to Jesus, not looking for or being interested in being touched by God, they came only to be entertained. You know the expression that even God can't steer a parked car? No wonder Jesus only healed those who came to be healed- for only they acted on the faith that God have them.

The disciples on the other hand, were commissioned to go out and preach. I am sure they served as advance men- get ready, Jesus is coming to town! On the other hand, they received priceless experience. Jesus' instructions to them forced them to rely completely on the hospitality of strangers. While Jesus had authority to heal in order to demonstrate God's presence and his authority, he chose to heal those who came to him. With the disciples it seems to be a different story- Jesus gives them the authority to heal- and they are able to heal all sorts of diseases and even cast out demons- but we are not told if their ability to heal was in any way dependent upon the recipient's faith. I doubt it- for in their acting out in faith they demonstrate Jesus' power and authority- which is of course the point.

What of us? We have been saying all along that God placed us here, in this place and time for a reason, and I can't help but think that part of that reason is to do our part to heal the heartache our country is experiencing. Part of the genius of the Founding Fathers was their approach to faith and civic values. They understood that there were very real benefits to society that religion brought to the table: shared values, mutual respect, an ethic that put the other guy's needs first, and a sense of purpose and belonging that was above the individual. The Founding Fathers were also students of history, they were very aware that the Reformation also spawned nearly a century of religious warfare as Catholics, Protestants, and various empires sought to carve up Europe, culminating in the 30 Years War. That was a road NO ONE wanted to go down. Their solution? Create a generic civil religion, one that was so vague, everyone could recognize it as their own. The basic tenets, as Ben Franklin ticked them off was

that there was one God who deserved to be worshiped. One served God by serving other people, treating them well and by working hard. See what I mean? There was no reason to have a state church- for every rabbi, priest and minister could recognize that the God that the Founding Fathers invoked was their God. Besides- various colonies had state religions- and they found that it was more trouble than it was worth. The benefits of a civil religion was that it promoted unity, self sacrifice and tolerance- pretty much all the things our country needs today.

But ours is no mere “civic religion.” The terms of the New Covenant- that our sins are forgiven by Christ’s actions and that we are transformed from the inside out by the Holy Spirit and all of this is a free gift of God’s grace- also give us authority to act as we extend Christ’s earthly ministry. We are no different than David and the Disciples- for we too have a job to do, one that is directed and empowered by Jesus Christ. We live in the greatest nation the world has ever seen. Americans has dared more, done more, and dreamed more than any other people. even the bonds of ethnicity are no match for our motto- **from many- one e pluribus unum**. Yet we have recently found ourselves lost, wandering amidst a forest of self seeking . we are going to confront the mindless materialism by pointing out what is of lasting value- restored relationship and lives of purpose. We are going to say NO to moral anarchy- and point out insistently that freedom is only experienced within the environment of stable society- and any action that corrodes that stability is a counterfeit freedom, one that is a deadly as poison. We are going to remind our leaders that the world does not need us at its policeman- the world needs us as its example. The puritans came here seeking to be a city on a hill, an example to all of how life could be lived , how a nation could be built. That challenge is still ours- and we will accept that challenge as faithfully and as patriotically as they did. Let us pray.