

Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 9, Year A
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When the British Colonies declared their independence 232 years ago they were guided by an imagination born hundreds of years before in southwestern England. In school we were taught to be impressed with the idea of democracy formed in the Greek city states of Homer, but surely one of the world's greatest cultures for valuing freedom and equality developed in England. The idea of Arthur's Camelot, with its round table and code of just behavior, was an early legend built mostly on the dream of a just and equitable government.

The shift from an imagined Camelot to the concreteness of the Magna Carta, to the development of Parliament, to the reduced and limited monarchy of George the Third all reveal a depth of love for justice and equity in England. It was this very love of justice that helped fuel the colonial revolutionaries to their indignation. Their rejection of British rule was couched mostly in the fact that residents of the colonies were not being treated as if they were still British citizens. They were being denied rights they had every reason to claim according to the traditions of English government. And in their anger over being mistreated, they began to believe that an even better, freer and more creative society was possible. In the end it was this belief in a grand possibility that energized their demand for independence.

By way of this story, the inspirations and the corruptions of applied theology come to light.

First, the corruptions: European aristocrats had read select verses of Genesis and the letters of James, Peter and Paul and extracted the distortion which led to Louis 15th. Instead of heeding the Bible's prophetic demand that governors and rulers serve the people on behalf of God, they distorted the idea of rule by God's election into a culture of privilege, abuse, thievery and arrogance. Louis 15th took noble ideals and, instead of serving those ideals, subjected them to the worst and most greedy aspects of human nature. By arrogance he and so many divine-right monarchs in Europe turned the responsibility for governing into a license to exercise the worst of human selfishness.

At the time Louis the 15th was trying to bed every female in Paris, the Americans were using their experience of injustice to imagine a new kind of society that would, at the same time, be more free and more uniformly lawful. They began to imagine a nation in which law was so justly, carefully and uniformly applied that it would permit greater freedom and liberty than any Western society had previously achieved.

While not many of those Founding Fathers we revere on this holiday searched the scripture for their justifications, still their imagination was steeped in the Christian culture and inspired by the knowledge of scripture. While many revolutionary leaders were skeptical of the kind of Christian devotion that led the Puritans to this continent, nevertheless all were moved by the gospels' generosity of love for all humanity. All were moved by some reverence for the earth as a creation of a benevolent God. All were moved in part by the optimism that God's creation had goodness at its core.

Thus, Jefferson's stirring and optimistic assessment of both government and humanity:

We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

– That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

So what might we claim from this history for our own time?

First, it is wise to remember that Louis XIV and Louis XV, perverse, arrogant, childishly selfish kings of France, were essentially creations of scripture. By virtue of quoting scripture and using selected texts to justify political doctrine, Europe came under the influence of the pernicious belief in the divine right of monarchs. Europe suffers under the legacy of that distortion to this day.

In a time when too many of our own politicians claim to govern by divine will, in which political campaigns depend on a public demonstration of personal piety, and in which nations search their scriptures to justify war, terrorism, and economic piracy, it may be good to recall all the wicked

doctrines of history that were justified as religious principles. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, the rejection of women's voting rights, and the slaughters of Auschwitz all were upheld by arguments from scripture and in the language of theology.

The Bible can empower and ennoble your life and the life of this church and the life of this nation. But any time it is used to justify a behavior or a doctrine, one has crossed the line into blasphemy and corruption. Scriptures can empower and ennoble human causes; they must never be used to justify human endeavors. Using scriptures for justification will almost certainly end up rationalizing injustice and oppression in the name of God.

Second, while Jefferson so elegantly expressed a synopsis of the gospel's grace in a few words, James Madison remembered the gospel as a necessary redress to the sinful nature of our existence. Jefferson may have inspired us with the Declaration of Independence, but Madison was the key architect of a constitution which essentially distrusts human nature and freedom to lead society into goodness.

The Constitution of our nation is a document of regulation and inhibition. It defines a process by which nothing can be done swiftly, through which every decision requires more debate and slower progress than most people find tolerable. Our Constitution abhors swift changes, and it places obstacles at every turn to prevent efficiency. Dictatorships are efficient. Democracy is laborious.

Built into the pages of that document, which is at the core of this nation's existence, is distrust for the President, distrust for the majority of the people, and distrust for the decisions of one generation to be true for all time. It has an elaborate system of checks and balances, but it is designed especially to limit the range of action any individual or any majority may take to themselves. Madison embedded in our national culture the reminder that while grace abounds, so too does sin. As we hear from the apostle Paul in this morning's reading, Madison appreciates that even those who desire to do what is good, who long to do what they know to be right, may find themselves guilty of doing the very thing they hate. Our constitution is capable of permitting great freedom, but only by restricting the most powerful to a limited range of action.

We would be wise not to overrule Madison's wisdom. The framers of the constitution knew that greater liberty for the most powerful will ultimately come at the expense of the liberty enjoyed by the most humble. Their great fear was not that individuals might get away with crimes, but that unchecked government would inevitably fall back into the corruptions and oppression that plagued their ancestors in Europe.

Finally, it is uncomfortable to remember that all this English devotion to equality and justice I have described, all this gracious devotion to liberty and self determination our Declaration and Constitution describe, were really not imagined by their authors to apply to most people like you and me. The Magna Carta was written to protect the interests of feudal lords, not peasants. The Parliamentary system was built in the expectation that women, field hands, soldiers, factory workers, servants, Catholics and Jews would never have a vote. Our own Constitution limited elections to male landowners in an age when most people were renters, living on the estates of a few. That means that of 700,000 residents of Virginia in 1789 less than 75,000 were eligible to vote. Not only did Madison distrust sinful human nature, he also distrusted everyone but wealthy white European men.

So we come back to Jefferson. His words, his imagination for the dignity of all humanity, found no voice in the words of the Constitution. The place for his words is in the soul, in the spirit of this nation. From his words were drawn the abolitionist movement, the emancipation proclamation, and the right of women to vote. From his idealism came the civil rights movement and the war on poverty. From his imagination for the positive power of liberty comes the United Nations and even the war with Iraq. From one who only reluctantly identified himself with Christianity has come one of the most explicit interpretations of the Gospel expressed in human history. Jefferson's idealism fuels the democratic and freedom loving dimensions of this experiment we call the United States. By the grace of God, to whom many of this nation's citizens pray, may we always have the courage to keep Jefferson's vision, a vision that perhaps God himself enabled him to express.