

July 3, 2011

Gracious God, May these words be your words of grace and love. Amen

When I was a kid, I loved 4<sup>th</sup> of July. My parents being rather reserved would allow us only to have the sparklers. But we couldn't wait until dark to bring them out. Once we lit them, we would dance around making designs in the dark that would disappear as quickly as they would appear. Later we would drive to what usually was an empty parking lot and set up for the fireworks. On a blanket, we would lie on the roof of the car and watch the beauty of the explosion of color before us. Fourth of July holds great memories for me. However, I find it really difficult to preach on this weekend. I celebrate that we have freedom of religion. I celebrate our history. But, I feel a bit uncomfortable. I will talk about that later.

The history of the United Church of Christ is an interesting one. It is intertwined with American history. We are uniquely an American denomination. Our first came to the Americas in search of freedom of religion. Later others came as immigrants from other parts of the world for freedom from starvation, freedom from violence, freedom from persecution, freedom for prosperity. We all have stories about how our ancestors came to the Americas. Each story is special with color and hope. We are a country that has been enriched by people who gathered here. Each brought something special, unique from their country of origin that enriched us. We have to be honest and repent of our violence as a nation toward indigenous tribes and African tribes, whose families were torn apart. BUT, my pride in the United Church of Christ is that it has often stood on the side of freedom and justice. During the Revolutionary War, when Britain threatened to melt the Liberty Bell, it was hidden under the floorboards of Mt. Zion Reformed Church. When slaves were threatened with imprisonment after taking over the Amsted, and mistakenly landing New England, it was among the founders of the UCC that stood up for them. We have stood on the side of justice.

In our Matthew scripture, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus. They compliment – warm him up to try to get him to slip up – because, no matter how he answers their question, he is in trouble. They ask, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The Roman Empire had overtaken their nation. It was squashing them down, oppressing them, and leaving them in poverty. If Jesus said, “Yes,” he would have been betraying his people, and if he had said, “No,” he would have been reported for treason. But Jesus, wise as he was, knew the right approach. And this approach causes us to pause. He said, “Show me the coin used for paying taxes”. On that coin would have been an imprint of the face of Caesar. The Roman Empire knew that title to mean “Son of God”. He was known for building an empire that was at the cost of others. He WAS the SON OF GOD!!! – according to the empire. Jesus’ reply was “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s”. What he was letting people of faith conclude was this – they are called to give their lives to God. Caesar was NOT the son of God, but a false image/false idol. The Son of God stood before them in the person of Jesus. We have to ask where is our primary loyalty in life.

I uncomfortably ponder the statement that Barbara Brown Taylor says, “American Christians often make the mistake that being Christian is no more than being a good citizen.” Ouch! Whenever I vote, I do it with thanks for all those who struggled for the women’s right to vote. When I call a congressperson, visit a representative or march in a protest, I do it with gratitude for those who have sacrificed so that we are able to be free to do these things. Media shots from all over the world continue to make that clear. But at what point do we begin to worship our country? Augustine says that being a Christian means prioritizing our loves. Our love for God must come first.

God calls us to a life in which we worship God by living a faithful life – as the prophet Micah speaks, “to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” God’s vision of freedom and peace is expensive and compelling. It is a vision for this whole planet. It is a vision where the greed of some doesn’t leave others homeless and hopeless. It is NOT a vision where our children are exposed to violence – real or imaginary. It is NOT a vision where corporations can break the “lesser than”. It is a vision where old hostilities, family and tribal hatred are laid to rest and there can be an end of war. God’s vision is even greater than even this. It is one of Shalom – a wholeness in which EVERY LIFE is sacred, everyone is fed, and everyone is free. God’s dream is not one in which the rich get richer and the poor have no value. It is one of unity, celebration and joy.

You see freedom from Jesus’ perspective is deep. That freedom is about shaking off the shackles of our fears, our past, our anxieties, or old unhealthy relationships, and giving it all to God and trusting in God’s love. Freedom is about breaking handcuffs of oppressive systems. Freedom comes from stepping outside of the prisons of “oughts”, of “sadness”, of “paralysis” and standing tall knowing that you are loved completely. Because of this freedom, we can be bold enough to love God in the way that we are called. Our faith impacts what we stand for and our passions in life. Are you passionate about something? And is this passion centered in God’s vision of freedom, peace, wholeness, and compassion? For too long we have hidden the true freedom of Christ under the floorboards of our churches. It is time to share that freedom with joy. Pitts in his sermon at Synod 28 said, “We tend to imprison God by the littleness of our imagination. The cosmos represents the smallest corner of God’s possibilities. It’s time to let God be God and break open our lives.

AS we celebrate this 4<sup>th</sup> of July, let us celebrate with sparklers, beauty and great love, always remembering that God has more for us. Let us worship God with all of our hearts and minds and strength and let us love our neighbor – wherever he or she may be – our neighbors may be continents away – as ourselves. Let us worship GOD.