

3 Pent A Matt 11:-16-30 2011

While reading recent articles concerning patriotism I was struck by the similarities concerning loyalty to our country and the patriotism, or loyalty, or allegiance if you will to our religion, and especially to our denomination, the Episcopal Church.

We struggle, both as citizens of the United States of America, and as Christians, as Episcopalians, to define and, at times, to support and defend our revered institutions. We struggle to understand the difference between traditions and core values, between looking to the past and looking to the future for guidance. Are the Bible and the Constitution of the United States to be interpreted along with tradition and reason, or are these documents to be understood only in one literal sense without regard to modern considerations?

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Hearing these readings on a day when many of us are engaged in celebrating American Independence Day brings to my mind the symbolic freedoms associated with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Along with these celebrations there is a time for rest. It is a long weekend – three days of rest rather than the usual two-day weekend. There are picnics, fireworks, and parades. Even though

our country is made up of a diverse mixture of people, nations, cultures, and languages, these readings and this holiday challenge us to engage in a full understanding of power and a complete surrender to God. They challenge us to question where our loyalties lie, but more importantly, we are challenged to understand that sin sometimes comes from inaction as surely as it comes from action. On this day we might even say that we are being challenged to free ourselves from the sinfulness of the world and to declare our lives in dependence to our God.

How often have we felt like Paul did in his letter to the Romans? No matter how hard we try to live according to the great commandments, to love God and love our neighbor, we don't always succeed. No matter how good we try to be, there is sin in the world. And sin is powerful. It is so powerful that sometimes we just withdraw from action and words, hide in our comfort zones, allowing whatever is happening to just happen. Our inaction becomes the sin, especially when we know that an injustice is causing suffering and causing separation between people and God.

Paul sounds like he is exhausted and in his desperation is unable to do any more to free himself from sin. His words suggest that maybe sin is lurking like a monster under the bed, just waiting to take us over.

Even in the gospel reading, Jesus reminds the crowd that some thought John was possessed with a demon, yet John lived a life of denial and simplicity. Jesus lived overturning injustices and unveiling the many ways that society's attitudes and laws actually reflected sinfulness rather than loving God and loving neighbors. He pointed out that sin could come from twisting the law to cause loss of humanity and life. Paul's cry of desperation is quickly calmed with his own acknowledgement that sin is defeated by God through our life in and with Jesus as our companion.

Jesus does not tell us that it is an easy task to be free of sin and follow him. In fact, there is a cost. The cost may even come from places we trust and have pledged our loyalty, such as our families, and our churches, and our country. That is why it is so hard to understand what sin is, and often just as hard to know what love is as well.

So, even when our motives are on target, sin seems strong enough to prevail. And yet, sin *cannot* exist when we abide in Christ and Christ in us. The Good News is that when we transfer our loyalty from the material powers of the world to the infinite love of God we find ourselves experiencing the passionate expressions of love that we read about in today's Old Testament reading and psalm. We are then filled with a sense of blessing and abundance.

The answers to everything are found in the unexpected, and with that come both peace and joy. Paul's cry of desperation is quickly calmed with his acknowledgement that sin is defeated by God through our life in and with Jesus as our companion. And no words, no matter how profound, can really describe love so that we or other people can understand.

These readings both challenge and assure us. They hint at the profound simplicity of a life in Christ, and they serve as a mirror for us to examine our understanding of who we are along with how we are living. Our desire is to love God and to love our neighbor. When we do not love God and our neighbor, we are in sin. It is that simple.

So, let us enjoy our holiday, and give thanks to all of the people who founded this great country and also to those who continue to defend it, both here and abroad. Let us remember that we may have differences between us both by political party affiliation and by our views of religious polity, but that *God welcomes us all*.

Jesus gave us these most reassuring words: Come to me, take my yoke, learn from me; I am gentle, humble in heart; you will find rest for your souls.

Let us come to God through Jesus. Let us take on the yoke of discipleship. Let us learn from Jesus. Be gentle, humble in heart and you will be at peace with all that God made.

