

“Church and State”

I don’t know what you first thought when you saw the sermon title, “Church and State,” but you might be forgiven for expecting an historical, judicial or theological tome on the history of the relationship between church and state in America. To tell you the truth, I did do a modest amount of research in that direction.

I began of course with the Pilgrims, who had no interest whatsoever in separating church and state: they came here to establish a theocracy and were all about official state religion, some forms of which survived well into the 19th century. Perhaps the last vestige of their view is preserved in our annual attempt to get the Governor to attend our Pilgrim Thanksgiving service and read the official state proclamation.

Then I did some reading around the Declaration of Independence with its strange ambivalence about government and divine authority, appealing variously to “the Laws of nature and of Nature’s God” as the authority for the unalienable rights which governments exist to secure; but then citing the “consent of the governed” as the authority which makes governments legitimate—this in clear distinction to the divine right of kings.

Roger Williams weighs in—not the piano player, but the Puritan cleric who was thrown out of Massachusetts to found his own state, Rhode Island. It was Williams who first wrote of “a hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.”¹ Thomas Jefferson adopted this language in arguing that “a wall of separation between church and state” is the intent behind the First Amendment to the Constitution.² Ever since, folks have been arguing over what Jefferson really meant and whether or not he was right. We can trace the arguments through numerous Supreme Court decisions and many books that argue that what the founders intended is precisely what the books’ authors happen to believe... a happy coincidence in nearly every instance.

¹ In *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*, 1644.

² From an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists. Jefferson was arguing that the intent was to preserve the church from the direction of the state as much as to preserve the state from following the directives of any particular church or sect.

But that is all I have to say about that. Instead I want to speak much more personally about the relationship between church and state as it exists in the life and heart of each one of us. For as surely as this is an important public issue, it is an important personal issue, as well. How do we sort out our love of God and our love of country?

There are some extreme positions which define the issue. Having the Fourth of July—Independence Day—fall on a Sunday brings the matter to a head for anybody planning worship. On one extreme would be a patriotic celebration of America as God's chosen nation, divinely endowed with the blessings of liberty and commissioned to bring American style freedom to the world. Such a service would call for the singing of patriotic hymns and quasi-religious popular songs like *God Bless America*. I'm sure there are a lot of churches doing that today.

At the other extreme would be a total disconnect between the patriotic pageants and displays in the world and the worship of the church: out there it might be Independence Day, but in here it's the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time. In this view we have no more religious obligation to observe the Fourth of July than we have to observe Valentine's Day or St. Patrick's Day or Groundhog Day. In my limited experience this is how the Fourth of July has been observed at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ: it isn't.

So those are the extremes. Most of us fall somewhere in-between. Let me tell you where I am.

I love the Fourth of July. I'm wearing a Declaration of Independence tie and have little embroidered flags on my socks. I love observing certain rituals which in any given year may include flying the flag, watching *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, making homemade ice cream, grilling hot dogs, taking in a baseball game with fireworks or—especially when our kids were younger—participating in a neighborhood parade. In 1976, the nation's bicentennial, July 4 also fell on a Sunday, and I was called-upon to read the Declaration of Independence aloud in the worship service in Branford, Connecticut. And I can still pronounce “unalienable” and “usurpations.”

So I love the Fourth of July. But I am also well aware that the United States of America is a work in progress, an ongoing experiment, if you will. We never fully live up to the ideals we espouse; and so the idea that waving the flag requires turning a blind eye to our shortcomings is something I reject. I love the saying attributed to Senator Carl Schurz in 1872: “My

country right or wrong: if right, to be kept right; if wrong, to be set right.”³ So there’s a delicate balance here for me. I have an ongoing lover’s quarrel with America.

Our scripture reading for this morning dates from more than twenty-six hundred years before the Declaration of Independence; yet it offers surprising clarity on the relationship between God and country.

In the days of Elisha the prophet there was a great military commander of a mighty neighboring nation, whom God favored. The nation is Aram, what today is southern Syria; and then as now it commands high ground from which to menace Israel. So this is a staggering assertion: not only is God the God of Israel; the Lord Yahweh is at work in the destinies of enemy nations, as well. Apparently God has had an eye on Naaman for a while. But this great worldly military success has an affliction: he is a leper.

Naaman’s household is served by a young Israeli girl who had been captured in a raid. Isn’t it amazing how often humble characters play pivotal roles in biblical stories? The servant girl observes that Elisha, mighty prophet in Israel, could cure Naaman’s leprosy. That’s all it takes.

Then the diplomatic machinery grinds away: Naaman goes to his king, who sends a letter to the king of Israel (along with a whole bunch of money), requesting a cure. The Israeli king is distraught: tearing his clothes is a clear indication of that. He thinks he’s being set up. “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” The king is being asked by a superior foreign power to do something he knows he can’t do. The only reasonable conclusion is that the king of Aram is trying to provoke a war; that’s cause to rend the old garments, all right.

The garment rending is a quasi-public event. It’s all over Facebook, and Elisha sends word to the king not to fret, but to send this Naaman fellow on over, so that Naaman may, “... learn that there is a prophet in Israel.” Elisha isn’t bragging on himself; it’s about the God of the covenant, the God of Israel.

The next scene is comical. Here comes Naaman, the great military commander, with his huge entourage, pulling up at Elisha’s place: horses, chariots, military escort... lights flashing, sirens blaring, shiny stretch Hummer. He’s an important person, you know—which is why he gets access to other important people. Isn’t that the way the world works? If this Elisha

³ Senator CARL SCHURZ, remarks in the Senate, February 29, 1872, *The Congressional Globe*, vol. 45, p. 1287.

is such a powerful prophet, he must be a special spiritual consultant to the rich and powerful, and Naaman certainly qualifies.

But when Naaman arrives, Elisha doesn't even come outside. He sends a messenger to tell Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan. It is as if the great general, learning he has a heart problem, seeks out a world-renowned cardiologist, who has the receptionist deliver a pamphlet on diet and exercise. Naaman is miffed. He snorts, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" What kind of treatment is this? No personal attention, no sudden and dramatic cure, no healing event—perhaps at a national prayer breakfast—no photo opportunity highlighting my deep spirituality: for this I came all the way from Aram? And the Jordan! (In most places, friends, despite what we sing about it, it's kind of a muddy ditch. There are better rivers back home in Damascus, running clear and fresh and sweet!) Not only did the prophet prescribe exercise, there's no week at the aerobics ranch, no special chef, no fancy leotard, no personal trainer! Naaman stomps off in a rage.

Once again, who introduces the element of sanity? It's the servants who manage to reason with Naaman. Is he disappointed because the prophet didn't ask him to do something hard? Would he feel better if Elisha had told him to climb Mt. Hermon backwards and pack himself in ice for three weeks? Bathing in the Jordan: it's simple, but why not give it a try?

So he does. The first required dosage, of course, is that Naaman has to swallow his wounded pride; usually that goes down with some difficulty. But Naaman does as the prophet prescribes. Is it the repetition? Is it the simplicity? Or is it the simple act of obedience that makes the difference? Whatever it is, it works: Naaman is cured. He is grateful beyond words to the prophet and the prophet's God. In what follows this morning's lesson, Naaman tries to give a huge gift to Elisha, but he's a non-profit prophet. So Naaman makes it clear that he knows that Yahweh, the LORD, the God of Israel has made him whole. He takes two mule loads of Israeli soil back with him, so that he may better worship God at home in Damascus. (How this is supposed to help him, I'm sure I don't know.) And he assures Elisha that, although he will be required to participate in cultic rituals back home, with a wink and a nudge and a crossing of the fingers, it is Yahweh to whom he will be praying.

So once again, Elisha has lived up to his name: "Yahweh saves." But it seems that Yahweh saves even Israel's enemies.

The story leaves us with the clear message that God is bigger than any particular nation. That's a tough message for any nation that presumes to have a "most favored nation" status with God. By referring to this story in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus nearly gets himself thrown off a cliff.⁴

Feeling run high on these issues! But the Bible is clear that all worldly authority exists under the judgment of God. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets and kings offer us a helpful model of the tension between church and state. The state exists to secure human rights and protect human dignity; religious communities, when they are functioning appropriately, help to serve as a moral check on the authority of the state.

Recognizing this tension does not require us to be blind to the many blessings we enjoy in this wonderful country. But those who are blessed are called in turn to be a blessing to others, not merely to amass wealth and secure privilege. There is no contradiction in coming before God with gratitude for our heritage of freedom and our political institutions; and also with contrition and the fervent prayer that we might more completely embody the ideals we celebrate.

The complex relationship between church and state is a negotiation carried out not only in the public sphere, but in each of our hearts and lives, as well. As American Christians it is possible for us to celebrate our nation's blessings even as we confess our excesses and pray that we may more faithfully fulfill the hope of liberty and justice for all.

On this Independence Day we take for our own these words of Katherine Lee Bates—words we sometimes sing all too easily:

*America, America! May God thy gold refine.
'Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine.*⁵

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
(515) 255-3149
Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM
Fax: 515-255-8667

⁴ Luke 4:27-30.

⁵ *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*, Katherine Lee Bates, 1893.

E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com