

B proper 09
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RCL

The Weak And The Strong

I've been thinking a lot about our country this past week, not surprising since this is the Fourth of July weekend. Let me share with you some of those thoughts, not in any particular order.

I've been thinking about how nations go about coming into being. They don't just pop out of nothing, as the universe did in the big bang. There are some ways not to do nation-building: outsiders cobbling together disparate unwilling people, as the allies created Iraq at the end of World War I; the conquest of other nations as Hitler attempted in World War II; the conquest of less developed people as the British did in Australia and as we did here in America. There are better ways for a nation to come into being: the blood-relatedness of peoples and tribes; the similarities that people share in a certain locale (culture, language, religion, technology, etc); rebellion against autocracy.

I can think of no other nation that started as ours did, certainly as a rebellion against an exploitive motherland, but also drawing energy from ideals not yet attempted in the political arena: freedom, equality, fairness, privacy, personal responsibility and independence, openness, rule by majority, protection for minorities, and much more that escapes me now. Nations are human attempts to bring order out of chaos and maintain that order. Most nations in history opted for the biggest-bully-on-the-block approach, trading freedom for security in monarchy. Ours was the first to find order in morality, a dangerous statement to make because it may be terribly misunderstood. I am not talking about moralism, which is the assumption of superiority of some over others because the other does not share the same ideas of how to live life. I am talking about morality, the dedication to ideals that lift us from the ordinary present into a better future, a dedication that, from the Christian point of view, attempts to discover how to honor the image of God in every individual, whether Christian or not. It is a dedication to persuasion, not force. It is a dedication to respect, not judgmentalism. It is a dedication to life, not death. It is a dedication to divine joy rather than human pessimism.

From one point of view, I think this is what Jesus was talking about two thousand years ago. He belonged to a nation that had slipped from morality into moralism, from the joy of Mount Sinai to the despair of the uncounted rules that governed everyday life. The Pharisees and the Sadducees controlled Judea culturally, though not politically. In an uneasy alliance with their political masters, Rome, these groups sought control and security through appropriating rightness to themselves and denying it to anyone who disagreed with them or who had not the means to follow their strictures. One of the reasons Jesus' message appealed to the common folk was that these folk had been denied acceptance in their own religion because they did not follow the Law as interpreted by these special-interest groups. Jesus came proclaiming that God's law was for everyone, not just those who had the means to follow the rules of the teachers. Jesus said that

God's law could be known and honored in the instinctively intuited power of compassion, reciprocity, and respect. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "Love one another."

That great theologian, Saint Paul, simply continued and expanded the insight of Jesus, expanding the concept of acceptability to God from being a Jew to being a compassionate, loving person. Non-Jews who responded to God through compassion, love, and obedience to a divine person rather than to divine rules were just as much God's people as the first ones called into God's community (the Jews). Jesus, and through Him Paul, called us all to a higher, more inclusive, more secure way of belonging to one another and to God. In the centuries that followed, this divine ideal of our Lord Jesus was often lost or subverted, but it remained there, to be re-discovered in different times and different places. One of those was the east coast of North America some two hundred years ago.

Speaking of Saint Paul, he writes something in today's reading from *Second Corinthians* that is worthy of note. Speaking out of his own life experience, he spoke of how inadequate and weak he felt when he compared himself to the call to sanctity and work he heard in Jesus. But God did not grant his request for an easier way of following the Lord. It was then that Paul had one of the great insights of our religion: "...whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2.10) Our strength does not come from within ourselves, our own virtue, our own goodness. It comes from God accepting us as we are, loving us as broken reeds, cherishing us as weak but worthwhile children of Her own good will (grace), and using what we have to offer in His own way, even when we don't understand. It is Paul telling us of the power of humility, one of the hardest virtues for us to grow into – not my way, O Lord God, but yours.

"...whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Doesn't that have something to say to us as we go about our daily lives of living with God in this wonderful land? Surely our founding fathers and mothers must have been tempted by the model of strength they saw in English monarchy; we know that some of them considered trading one king for another, [George Washington](#). But wiser, and perhaps humbler, heads prevailed and they chose the way we have been talking about, a way that appeared to be weaker than the secure power of the big bully on a throne. We talked about them earlier: freedom, equality, fairness, privacy, personal responsibility and independence, openness, rule by majority, protection for minorities, and much more. There will be times, as there have been times in our past, where some unbelieving souls will tempt us to forsake our ideals – to opt for security bought at the price of devaluing the other, of torturing the image of God incarnated in other folks, of forsaking our ideals of freedom, fairness, respect, and honor.

Our scriptures urge us to cooperate with our government. Here is Paul taking to the Romans: Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. (13.1) Paul goes on to draw limits, that is, the authorities are to punish wrongdoers, not the law-abiding. The implication, of course, is that the government is not a law unto itself; it is under the guidance and judgment of God, every bit as much as the

individual. There may be reason to rebel, as our ancestors once did, but the reasons must be serious.

Let us not give in to temptation to the lesser ways of human bullying. Let us live in the power of the strength of our God. Let us live in the power of the strength of our national ideals, even though they at times appear to make us vulnerable. When we are weak, then are we strong, for God is our strength.