



THE LAND OF THE FREE AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, June 29, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit.
RCL Readings: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; and Matthew 10:40-42.

The relationship between church and culture is a mutually prophetic relationship, which is a way of saying that each is sometimes prompted by God to call the other back to the Covenant. Sometimes we act as if the culture is fraught with dangers that will lead us astray, while the church embodies the best of the human condition. The problem with that assumption is that the Spirit of God is as present in the culture as in the church, and those of us who know and love the church also know that the church is *hardly* free from sin. I think it was that cultural icon, Ann Landers, who once said the church is a hospital for sinners, not a monument to saints. So, sometimes it is the church that calls the culture to new understandings of the principles that bind us together in community, and sometimes it is the culture that serves to remind the church of the fundamentals of our faith, and moves us to a deeper and more faithful response – slavery might be an example.

Next Sunday will be our Independence Day celebration. The church is often wary of occasions of triumphal nationalism. Patriotism tends to ride on tides of fashion. At times, the currents of public opinion find it praiseworthy, inspiring and virtuous. At other times, national and international events shift our field of vision and patriotism can become fanatical, arrogant and triumphalist. Next week we will have readings that shaped our nation interspersed with national hymns and hope by putting them in context we can put them in perspective as well.

And yet, we are all from a particular place, a city, a region, a nation, and our experience of that place has contributed to who we are and what we believe. What begins as an accident of birth becomes a formative part of our being.

Christianity has a history that transcends national boundaries. However, successfully combining the sentiments and convictions of heart-felt religion and soul-stirring

patriotism has always been a tricky business. Who can forget the barbarism of the European "Crusaders" who attempted to wrest the holy lands from the "Infidels?" Who can forget the massacres of Native Americans at the hands of the United States Army, or the Afrikaners excuses for the horrendous "homelands" in the black townships that encircled the all-white cities of apartheid South Africa?

But patriotism coupled with Christianity does not *always* turn out tragic examples of bigoted triumphalism. The English churchman, scholar and politician William Wilberforce, during the nationalistic era of the late eighteenth century, defined patriotism as "a quality that bound men and women to their homeland without confining philanthropy to a single nation."

(William Wilberforce, "A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professional Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes, Contrasted with Real Christianity - London: T. Codell and W. Davies, 1797), 395-396.)

The life of William Wilberforce refutes the popular notion that a politician cannot be a committed Christian, dedicated to the service of humanity.

Wilberforce served as a member of the House of Commons for forty-five years. His conversion to the Christian life occurred in 1784, several years after he entered Parliament. Fortunately, he was persuaded not to abandon his political activities. He devoted himself to the promotion of overseas missions, popular education, and the reformation of public manners and morals. He supported parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation. Above all, his fame rests upon his persistent, uncompromising, and single-minded crusade for the abolition of slavery and the slave-trade, which was abolished in 1807.

Some of Wilberforce's convictions stemmed from the fact that Christianity is love in action. God's love for humanity is singularly incarnated in Jesus, who sacrificed his life on the cross for love of God and humanity. But even the universal love of God in Christ was initially *particularized*. God chose a specific people to join the divine in a special relationship. Jesus was born a Jew, a Galilean, and a Nazarene. His nationality and heritage are an integral part of God's salvation story. Even Jesus' own mission and ministry were initially directed only at God's historic partners, the Jews. He did not recognize his larger mission to the world until his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman which we will come to in August. (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30.)

However, it is the role of the particular that inspires our love for home and family. And our love for one place and one people in no way limits our ability to love others as well. God called a halt to the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews and settled them in the land of Canaan.

Francis Scott Key exemplifies a love of God and country. The author of the words to

our national anthem took seriously his responsibilities as both a Christian and an American. Key was a staunch Episcopalian, a Warden of St. John's, Georgetown, and a founder of my *alma mater*, Virginia Theological Seminary.

It was in the midst of the War of 1812 that Key stepped out of obscurity and into American history. On the night bridging September 13th and 14th, in the year of 1814, Key found himself in a boat on the Chesapeake Bay on a mission. He had volunteered to assist with a prisoner exchange - trading a captured British officer for the release of an aged, but highly respected American physician. With the approval of the President and official credentials, Key began a two-week voyage down the Chesapeake searching for the already departed British fleet.

Key's mission was successful. He returned with the good Dr. Beane, and "The Star Spangled Banner" written as a hymn of thanks for the deliverance of the city of Baltimore. Unlike other national anthems, "The Star Spangled Banner" does not extol the glories of battle or the nobility of soldiering. It is an offering of thanksgiving to God for an event of unexpected salvation.

While separation of church and state are critical to the free exercise of religion, religion and politics inform and affect each other. Doug Adams of the Pacific School of Religion collects political prayers. Some will amuse you.

From Lyman Beecher: "O Lord, grant that we may not despise our rulers; and grant, O Lord, that they may not act so we can't help it."

From Samuel Eaton, a Congregationalist: "Lord, Thou has commanded us to pray for our enemies; we would therefore pray for the President and Vice-President of these United States."

Justin Martyr (d. 167) paid with his life for his energizing witness to the faith. He professed his faith in the words of the earliest Christian creed, "Jesus Christ is Lord." That creed was a political statement as well as a theological one. This early creed inspired the church and strengthened the resolve not to let the emperor or the state take precedence over God.

John M. Buchanan writes that in that simple affirmation, Christianity deprived the emperor and every totalitarian in history, from Nero to Hitler, to the old regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the former Soviet Union, of the one thing totalitarianism must have, and that is the unquestioned loyalty and obedience of its subjects. "Jesus Christ is Lord" was first of all a political statement. And people who

said it were not scolded for misguided theology. They were executed for treason. (—John M. Buchanan, Chicago, Ill., 3 July 1994.)

Today there is continued debate over the words “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance. So, I have been reflecting on the issue of religious freedom.

First, what came to me was a memory – a memory of the time in the 1950’s when those words “under God” were *first added* to the Pledge of Allegiance, and I had to *re-learn* it.

The second thing that struck me was the intensity of the emotional response today. In the 1950’s, when those words were added, we lived in a very different world and we knew where people were on Sunday mornings. They were all in the pews with the rest of us. Everybody went to church. When those words were added to the Pledge, the only non-Christians in my community were Jews, who worshipped the same God. So, I would like to think that the bursts of outrage have something to do with faith, but I must confess that I do not expect a corresponding groundswell in church and synagogue attendance on weekends. Six years ago or so the Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional. I found it curious to see the members of Congress all standing outside and reciting the Pledge in staunch defiance of the ruling, and remembering wondering where they were the following weekend when the press had moved on to other matters.

The third thought that came to me was to wonder how something different might sound, so I tried out the words:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, ‘under Buddha,’ with liberty and justice for all...”

Then I tried, “...one nation, ‘under Allah,’ with liberty and justice for all...”

Now, some of you may hear it differently than I do, but no matter how I play with the words, the idea that my children or grandchildren could be asked to recite either of those on a daily basis is not what I would want for them. So, if the price of religious freedom - if the price of safeguarding our society from the imposition of a faith that is not our own means restoring the original language, I can live with that.

With a nod to Mrs. Vialley, my kindergarten teacher, I can still say it the way she first taught us. “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

In the end, no Pledge of Allegiance can tell us who, ultimately, governs “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” That question is a faith question, and we already know, as a matter of faith, who is in charge of the world.