

Pentecost 7, Proper 9
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

July 7, 2024
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Layers and Loyalties

I had an uncle who worked his whole life as a bar tender at a high-end Jewish country club in Florida. He was extremely good at what he did and made a good living at it. I understand that he knew how to pour a layered cocktail. I had never heard of it before—maybe you have. Apparently, it takes quite a while to pour, because you have to let the heavier liquids, the ones with more sugar and less alcohol, settle before you pour the next layer. It always infuriated him when the first thing the purchaser did was to take a swizzle stick and stir the whole thing into a homogenized mess!

Today is the Sunday closest to July 4th, the celebration of the independence of these United States from England. How does a Christian approach this holiday? It's much like a layered cocktail. There are deep levels and there are lighter levels, and mixing them up is never a good idea. Let me illustrate.

When I was a boy, after we had moved from tribal lands into the local trading town, I would often see members of the tribe in town. The wearing of traditional dress in public was still quite common. Their Spanish was accented and easy to spot, not only by me, but by the residents of the town. More than once, I witnessed the micro-aggressions of the dominant majority against a minority. The problem was, part of me deep inside relates to the Tsachi people. Their world-view influences mine in some very fundamental ways. Their way of life is familiar, easy, and can feel very much like home. When they were slighted, I felt slighted. I remember thinking, "What's wrong with these people? Can't they respect people as they ought? Don't you see that these people are as much citizens of this country as you are?"

Then I would remember that, though citizenship was shared, culture was not. Culture is a deeper layer in the mind and heart of a people. Nationality floats on top of that, along with socioeconomic status, place of origin, and I would contend, even race.

As a Christian, then, it is tempting to assume that my nation's values and my religious premises are essentially one thing. Take liberty, for example. Is not the God of the Hebrews the God who took them out of the land of bondage into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey? In our Pledge of Allegiance, so we not name liberty and justice for all as a national value? Does not the Declaration of Independence start with a statement about all being created equal? I believe both, I hold both to be rooted in truth, goodness and beauty, but this is precisely the kind of mixing of the cocktail that is not a good idea. Yes, liberty is rooted in truth, goodness and beauty, and yes, it can be traced through both our faith and our country's founding documents, but in our faith liberty speaks of the sacred dignity of every human being, and in our nation, of equal standing

before the law.

This category confusion energizes White Christian Nationalism in these United States today. Being white, being Christian and being a citizen of the United States are all wrapped up into one confused homogenized mess, making it impossible to recognize that in another culture, or in another religious tradition, liberty might also be an ideal, though it might be understood slightly differently. White Christian nationalism blinds its adherents to the truth that citizens of this nation who are not white and Christian are just as committed to this nation's ideals as those who are.

The Scripture lessons shed light on this kind of layering of loyalties. Let's look at them. Jesus got the most resistance to his message in Nazareth, his own home town. His disciples find better reception in other areas of Galilee. At home, people couldn't see through the layers of family connections to the God Incarnate revealed in his ministry.

Though St. Paul had visions of heavenly splendor, the thorn in his flesh reminded him that the message of Christ was of a more fundamental order than his spiritual experiences, and are not to be confused.

Even the psalm, a psalm of praise, raises a lament at the end, "We have had too much of the scorn of the indolent rich," calling forth images of people who, confident in the political influence of their money, forget that they stand before a higher power in the end. I have to admit to memories of citizens of these great United States in Ecuador, who somehow couldn't remember that they were guests in the country. Each of these is a lesson in layering.

Call me unpatriotic, disloyal, conflicted or even treasonous if you must, but as a minister of the Gospel, I am compelled to name the truth. Our loyalty to our country is a lighter fluid than our faith. Our participation in our culture is deeper, more pervasive in our life experience, coloring and giving context to everything we do, say and believe, but our loyalty to Christ is the first and most foundational layer.

Now, there is a bit of a conundrum here that also needs to be named. If our culture is the filter through which we experience life, is it not also the filter through which we see our faith? Yes, it is. To ignore that is to slip into that same confusion of White Christian Nationalism. To ignore that is to create Jesus in our own image. However, at the same time, when we approach our faith carefully, when we listen deeply and humbly, when we have become aware of some of our own cultural values in contrast to those reflected say, in Scripture, then a wondrous thing happens. We hear the dictates of our faith measuring the convictions of our culture and of our nation. Some things will be confirmed, and some things will be challenged.

This is what it means to be a Christian and a citizen of the United States at the same time.

It is to become aware of the deepest layers of the cocktail of our existence, and of what floats above them. It is to go to the work of listening carefully, prayerfully and diligently to the voice of the Spirit, calling us to confirm certain things in our culture and in our nation, but having the courage at the same time to call other things out.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision. God said, "Go tell them to repent. They won't listen to you, but speak up anyway. At least they will know there is a prophet in Israel." Let our world know that there is a prophet in their midst!