

Zechariah 9:9-12 Pastor Bill Uetricht 7/03/11 3 Pentecost

So much to preach on! So little time!

From my perspective, it doesn't get any better than what we hear from Paul in Romans today. I think we can all relate to Paul: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate . . . So I find it to be a principle (a law) that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." Oh, that is such good stuff. It is so true. We often end up doing what we don't want to do. We often go down paths that we don't want to go down. Sin is a power that takes hold of us, controls us. It's not surprising that we end up saying about ourselves, "Wretched people that we are!" All of this could preach!

So, too, could the marvelous gospel reading from Matthew! It doesn't get any better than this! In this reading, the religious leaders of Jesus' day are being confronted with their rejection of both John and Jesus. "To what can I compare this generation?" Jesus asks. His response to his own question is that "this generation" (i.e., the religious leaders) are like a bunch of kids who don't know what they want. One group of kids say, "Let's play wedding," and the other kids say, "No, we don't want to do that." And then one group says, "Let's play funeral," but the other group says, "No, forget that!" In other words, Jesus is telling the religious leaders, you don't like John because he is too strict, too straight, too much of a teetotaler, and you don't like Jesus because he isn't a teetotaler, he seems to like parties, and hangs out with questionable people. Well, what do you really want? Jesus is asking.

This is so good. We human beings are so like this. We don't know what we want. Look at the electorate in this country. We change our minds as quickly as we change our clothes. This really could preach.

Yet it is the Fourth of July weekend, the weekend that we celebrate our nation. And I am aware of the fact that I probably have never preached a sermon on how the faith relates to the subject of the nation and love for it. And in many ways that is not surprising. There is not much Biblical warrant for such a sermon. A good deal of the Bible includes ranting against oppressive nation states like Egypt, Babylon, Rome, and Greece. And what's more, holidays like Memorial Day, Labor Day, and the Fourth of July are not church holidays. They are not a part of the church calendar. So the folks who came up with the list of readings for each week didn't pay attention to national holiday themes.

Yet today I find that I want to break my silence on this subject, even though some of my favorite texts in all of the Bible are given to us today. I want us to do some reflection today on what love for the nation means in light of the Christian faith, how patriotism and Christian faith come together. And I want us to do it in light of the somewhat obscure passage that we are given today in our first lesson from Zechariah. Zechariah is not a book that we hear from too much. And in some ways, that is okay! It was written at a time when the Persians had taken over Judah, the people of God. The Persians were friendlier to the Jews than were their predecessors, the Babylonians. During their reign the Jews were allowed to rebuild their temple. But admittedly, the economic situation in Judah and in the home town of Jerusalem wasn't particularly good during the early part of the Persian reign. So the Jews who had been exiled during the Babylonian era and who came back to Jerusalem found that things there weren't so good. And some of the exiles wouldn't come back because of the bad economic situation.

What we have in today's lesson is political poetry that is trying to encourage these exiles—those who came back and those who didn't. The encouragement involves a picture of the promised coming Messiah, the king who would finally make things right. Note how Zechariah describes this national hero. He is said to be victorious and triumphant. Yet he doesn't ride into town on a stately horse. No, he comes into town on a donkey, a little donkey. And what he, this humble one, does, is to shut down the war machine. He is a Messiah of peace. He commands peace, not just to Judah, but to the nations. His dominion is said to reach from "sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth." A national hero is said to be a hero for the whole world. The view here is not of the individual state, but of the whole world.

Now what do we make of all of this? On the one hand, there is no doubt but that the Bible often as it describes the future does so with a view toward all of us, toward the whole planet. It would be right, therefore, to see ourselves as citizens of the globe. It would be right as we relate to others to practice a little humility, as does the Messiah on the young, little donkey in Zechariah. The early church without a doubt was not eager to see itself as a national entity. The Book of Acts in the Bible is quick to describe the church as a community that is from all nations and, therefore, bigger than any nation state. The church and the nation state can never be thought of as being the same. We as Christians in this country must come to grips with that. We must never identify the faith with our nation or, for that matter, any nation. To do so is to be arrogant, not humble, to practice what the Bible would label "idolatry."

Yet this does not mean that we don't celebrate our uniqueness, what some folks would call our "particularity." We are residents of the

globe, members of the church of every place and time, but, undoubtedly, there is a particularity about us. All of us are shaped by a particular place. Much of the Bible is preoccupied with the particular place known as Israel. Particularity is not a bad thing. We are shaped by where we have come from, what our geography has been, the ideals that have surrounded us. All of these things are a part of what God has gifted us with. And from my perspective, there is every reason to celebrate our particularity, every reason to celebrate the beauty of our land and our people. We who are Muskegonites and Michiganders have been gifted with remarkably beautiful geography. This is a wonderful town, an amazing state. We have fascinating people. There is no reason why we shouldn't stand proud to say that we love this place. This place has shaped us, given us so much.

And we can say the same thing about our nation. "Oh beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountains majesty, above the fruited plain." The nation that is our home is beautiful. It is amazing. Our people are phenomenal, and increasingly so as we become more diverse. And the ideals for which we stand are certainly worth paying attention to. There is absolutely no reason why we can't light some fireworks, walk in a parade, eat some hot dogs, fly our flags, dress in red, white, and blue to celebrate the greatness of our particularity.

Yet it is worth our while doing so remembering that others feel the same thing about their particularity. Ohioans, North Dakotans, Georgians, Swedes, Finns, Tanzanians, Australians, Afghanis have the same affection for the places that have shaped them as do we. Good patriotism is not a matter of standing tall to say that we are number one, that we are better than others, that we have more toys and guns

than others, or that others will be all right if they just become like us. Good patriotism takes seriously that we are shaped by the places from which we have come, that we are all gifted by the land and the people we call home.

Listen to the words of country duo Brooks and Dunn as they describe what is in my opinion good patriotism:

I was raised off of old Route 3
Out past where the blacktop ends
We'd walked to church on Sunday morning
Race barefoot back to the Johnson's fence
That's where I first saw Mary
On that roadside pickin' blackberries
That summer I turned a corner in my soul
Down that red dirt road

It's where I drank my first beer
It's where I found Jesus
Where I wrecked my first car
I tore it all to pieces
I learned the path to heaven is full of sinners and believers
Learned that happiness on earth ain't just for high achievers
I've learned I've come to know
There's life at both ends
Of that red dirt road

And listen to the words of one of our local gems, folk singer Ruth Bloomquist:

Maybe it's something in the water
Maybe it's something in the air
Maybe the leaves in the autumn
That keeps me coming back here
I'm a Michigan Girl
Raised in the shade of the white pine
Walked the trails of the Porcupine
Proud to call this home mine

We have been gifted with so much. There is every reason to be proud to call this home ours. And in the midst of our own pride we recognize the pride of others as they embrace the gift that has been given them. And they and we join together in longing for that day

when we all shall be one, when peace shall be from “sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth,” that day when the beauty of **all** of the world and the “glory and honor of **all** of the nations” will be woven by God into the most amazing tapestry the world has ever experienced.

I trust that this image, inspired by Zechariah, preaches. I trust that it preaches so well that you and I, proud residents of this city, state, and nation not only celebrate what we have been given but live in a way that is open to the world, live peaceably and gently, anticipating what God promises to do for all of the nations and all of the world.