

Living Out of Control in God's Peaceable Kingdom
July 6, 2014
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Psalm 145:13-14
Matthew 11

I hope each of you was able to take some time this Fourth of July weekend to relax and enjoy time with friends and family. This uniquely American holiday means many things to many people. I was the day of Thomas Jefferson's death, after he had held on for 7 months with pancreatic cancer, trying to make it to the 50th birthday of the document he helped write, the Declaration of Independence.

For our family, the fourth has always been, first and foremost, our daughter Sophie's birthday, and that is another story of "hanging on." The short version is that the baby's doctor had plans for the Fourth of July. So she induced the baby to come on the night of the 3rd. But the Fourth had always been Sophie's due date, and Kelly was not going to have it any other way. She fought off the inducement drugs until midnight, pushed twice and Sophie was born 5 minutes after midnight.

For most, however, the Fourth of July is about our nation's birthday. In many churches today, congregations will sing nationalistic songs and hear a message that blends religion and patriotism. Some churches invite military leaders to speak. No doubt, the message in some churches will be one of so-called American exceptionalism, that God somehow loves America more than other nations and other peoples, that there is something inherently better about us.

We are indeed enormously blessed to have been born here ... or to have been born elsewhere and to have become American citizens. And our faith is not unrelated to our citizenship, our responsibility that comes with our blessings. How keenly we are aware that these are enormously complex and, in too many places in the world, dangerous times. These are times when we need our faith as both guide and assurance.

But there is always conflict in the world, so-called hot spots that bear watching as well as prayer. The violently militant group known as Isis is engaged in a military takeover of Iraq. Egypt and Syria are in internal upheaval. Tensions between Israel and the Palestinian people have spiked alarmingly. Russian separatists have seized much of Ukraine.

Al Quaida poses an imminent threat across the Mideast but also, through the tendrils of terrorism, far too close to home. The terrorist group Boko Haraam, which figuratively means “Western education is a sin,” runs rampant in Nigeria.

In South Sudan, civil war has killed thousands, displaced a million people and pushed that nation to the brink of famine. All the while, U.S. relations with North Korea, China and Russia are tender at best.

Yes, as Americans but also as citizens of the world, there is more than enough to pray over. Some news analysts even draw parallels between these days and the tense global scenario of a century ago. A 19-year old Serb assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. That one shot released years of built-up nationalistic tensions across Europe, triggering what became World War 1.

For many in America, all of this amounts to an urgent call to arms, a mandate to shape the world in America’s image, to impose the American will and the American way on cultures and peoples far beyond our shores and our borders, in the name of freedom but also our economic interests. It is all an effort to be “in control.”

On this Sunday of the Fourth of July holiday weekend, that is the message many congregations will hear. But nothing could be further than what Jesus would have us do. Instead, Jesus said in the Gospel of John:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (14:27)

None of this is to express even the slightest ingratitude for or disrespect to those who serve our country in the military. None of this is to degrade the memory and the meaning of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for me and for you. Nor is it to say that there is not evil in the world that must be confronted. There is and it must.

It is only to say that there is no time like today, no time like the Lord’s Day on this weekend, to remind ourselves that, as people of God, we are called first and foremost to the ways of peace. We are called to be citizens of the Peaceable Kingdom of God, and this call comes before we are defined by any shade of earthly nationalism and the violent ways nations too-often settle their disputes.

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A few moments ago we heard a reading from Matthew. Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world and is describing the life of discipleship. It will be, Jesus says, a struggle, a struggle for faith, hope, love and justice, values and convictions the world will spit back in the disciples' faces.

Jesus doesn't mince words in verses 16-19 of chapter 11. His tone is sharp. He says most people are pretty simple, pretty predictable. Someone plays music and everyone is expected to dance. Or when someone wails aloud, others can be expected to join in the mourning. In other words, people usually go along to get along, not unlike little children in the play yard who follow along in exchange for acceptance and companionship.

But, Jesus says, he and John the Baptist just didn't fit the mold, didn't play the same old game, didn't do what most people expect. So, Jesus reminds his followers, their critics judged and dismissed them based on what they ate, how they lived and whose company they kept rather than what they said and what they stood for. Such was the call to discipleship. Such was the world into which Jesus was sending his disciples. Jesus wanted them only to be fully informed.

For me, these verses brought to mind the television police drama *Hill Street Blues*, which aired in the 1980s. Each episode started out in the patrol briefing room, where a fatherly senior officer briefed the beat cops before they hit the streets. At the end of each briefing, just as the beat cops were headed out, the fatherly sergeant would raise his voice and re-gather the room for one more moment and say, "And ... hey. Let's be careful out there."

In these verses in Matthew, Jesus is saying to his disciples as they head out into the world, "Hey, it's not easy out there. You will be dismissed, rejected and ostracized, or worse."

So it was for the Freedom Riders and other civil rights workers, whose stories are being remembered in documentaries in this anniversary of the "Freedom Summer. They fought and even died that all would have the same rights as Americans, despite race, creed or color. They bore non-violent witness to God's Peaceable Kingdom.

So it was at the PC(USA) General Assembly just ended. After years of waiting and discussing and debating, a majority stood up for a more complete inclusion of gays and lesbians by voting to allow PC(USA) ministers to perform same-gender weddings in states where that is legal.

But that was not the only matter in which Presbyterians danced a somewhat different dance than others faith traditions in America. We waded into the waters of capitalism with a vote to divest funds from three companies that profit from Israel's military occupation of Palestine. This will, no doubt, strain our relationships with our Jewish sisters and brothers as well as those who say the church ought to stay out the marketplace.

As one of you wrote to me about this: "This is bold. Talk about putting your money where your mouth is at the risk of creating tension and possible negative public discussion."

But there was more out of the General Assembly meeting. Commissioners also:

- Opposed military targeted killings by drones without due process
- Urged stronger policies against human trafficking
- Offered recommendations in favor of a fairer United States tax system
- And, stood up against the tidal wave of gun violence in several ways,
 - Urging sessions to make their churches "gun-free zones"
 - Opposing "stand your ground" laws
 - Encouraging tougher legislation restricting semi-automatic and large-caliber guns, and
 - Calling on gun manufacturers to cover security, medical and financial liability costs in cases where gun misuse can be predicted

Commissioners emphasized our need to confess when we Christians are complicit in the world's violence. And it affirmed Christ's authority as the Prince of Peace amid all global conflict.

You can take time later to read about all this and more in the insert in your bulletin today, produced by the PC(USA).

We can already heard the criticism of these decisions and policies. People will say that we Presbyterians are just a bunch of namby-pambies, cloaking ourselves in Jesus and taking the easy way out.

But I, for one, would say it is quite the opposite. It is easier to carpet bomb our global enemies into submission than to seek peace. It is easier to gather personal weapons of every sort so we can outgun the bad guys than to address the root causes and real solutions to violence and hopelessness in America. It is easier, for some at least, to stockpile so much money that one can buy his way to a safe, comfortable life than to

live fully in the midst and in relationship with the have-nots. It is, as Jesus said, easier to go along to get along than to stand apart and to stand up for the Peaceable Kingdom of God.

In all of these ways, so many, including some of us here, if we are honest, simply want to be in control. But that is not what Jesus had in mind for his disciples. It is not the call to discipleship. It is not the stuff of the Kingdom of God.

On this Fourth of July weekend, we as a so-called Christian nation want to try to control so many parts of the world, especially closest to home. But that is not really the life of discipleship. Nor is it even really possible.

Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

“For the irony is that no one is more controlled than those who assume they are in control or desire to be in control. It is the rich above all whose wealth gives them the illusion of independence, separateness, of being “in control.” But all of us in one way or another willingly submit to the illusion that we can rid our world of chance and surprise.”¹

It is a difficult thing to admit that, isn't it? It's even more difficult to admit that history is not in our hands when we think that all we are trying to do is to make the world better, indeed, more like the Kingdom of God.

But that is the tension we live in. It is the reality of our faith to admit that we are not in control. Yes. Our faith calls us to take stands like those taken by the General Assembly. Our faith also calls us to examine the local landscape and actively and vigorously bear witness in our own back yard, a city of exclusive neighborhoods and gleaming skyscrapers that is also one of the most difficult cities in the nation for the poor to ever escape poverty.

Yet, we live in that tension, as uncomfortable as it is, to bear witness to the Kingdom of God. We do so to help build that Kingdom, in allegiance to the one who is our King, praying God will use our witness to bring the Kingdom into reality.

We do so as Americans, recommitting ourselves to the pledge on our dollar bill, a pledge and a prayer that ought to remind us of who is really in control, “In God we trust.”

Amen.

¹ The Peaceable Kingdom, p. 105