

Memorial Day Weekend. May 29, 2011. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I have a friend who lives in Washington D.C. and who, much to her surprise, has become quite well-known in religious circles: her name's Diana. I remember talking with her a few years ago about something that happened in mid-Summer of the previous year.

Perhaps I remember the details because I share with Diana a love of Thai food, and she began her story with "we were eating in a Thai restaurant"! It was a pleasant evening, not too humid by D.C. standards, and they decided to go over to the Lincoln Memorial.

They parked a short distance from the monument and in the cooling evening walked toward it. In doing so they had to pass the Vietnam Memorial - a "dark reminder of both that war", she said, "and the ones" we've been fighting for nearly ten years.

As they passed the memorial they saw two army officers in dress uniform standing looking at it, and Diana heard one say to the other: "I hope the president has been here recently."

It reminds me of a comment often heard on both front-lines during World War I: that the war could be ended in a few days if the politicians who started it had to spend just a little time in the trenches.

Memorial Day is not about politicians, nor the decision-making around waging war, nor whether or not to actually do so. It's a day to remember those who have done the fighting and the dying. Not to do so would be to dishonor our communal decision here at St. Augustine's to name both the men and women of our armed forces killed in both Iraq and Afghanistan - now more than 6,000 - not to mention the over 37,000 wounded - and also to pray for all victims of war -

Whatever the political justifications, Soldiers, Sailors, Aviators, fight for a future vision of a distant field of peace where will shake our heads in wonderment because we will no longer be able to conceive of how the death and destruction were possible.

Such action is honored in Christian tradition - most recently and powerfully, perhaps by the German saint and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a genuine man of peace who still believed that there are situations - rare situations! - in which violent struggle is not only right but just.

While saying this, Bonhoeffer added an oft-forgotten rider - that when we engage in violent struggle we must - in the very act of taking it - repent for having had to resort to such extreme measures, and ask for God's forgiveness and that of those whom we fight.

The struggle to understand the role of our faith in the civic and national identity that we share is an ancient one - it's clearly present in the New Testament, and becomes very pointed after Constantine made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire.

Yet in recent years conversation in religious circles over this Church-State relationship has been muted. For too long nearly all of the mainline denominations have avoided engaging in

communal conversations about war and peace that are today so much at the center of our common life as a nation and as Christians.

It's been too easy, on the one hand, to fall into the thoughtless trap of assuming that God is on our nation's side in waging war, or that the religious community should unthinkingly support the civic actions and decisions of government. Or, on the other hand, to believe that any support for or engagement in war is simply wrong and we as Christians should isolate ourselves from those in our nation who engage in it. This overly-simplistic way of seeing the world is destructive of true dialogue. We need to ask the difficult questions together and get away from the narrow demonizing of those with whom we disagree.

The reason Diana and her husband were headed to the Lincoln Memorial was not to stand with the visitors and tourists beside the great statue and have a picture taken, but rather so that she could read again Lincoln's words there inscribed from his 2<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Address where he reflected on the complexities of faith and nationhood for both North and South:

"Both," he said, "read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes...." And the passage concludes with this: "With malice toward none; with charity toward all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds....to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations."

"The Almighty has His own purposes." There's no certainty in Lincoln's words that God will, in fact, bless America - a reality that all the different shades of contemporary politicians seem blithely to assume. Rather, there's an awareness that in war good and evil are thoroughly intermingled, and God's involvement in human affairs is anything but simple.

For us to live as both Christians and as citizens in light of these "transcendent realities" is not easy. To continue to live both as Christians and as citizens we have to come to some sort of understanding that each is informed by the other, and - except in a fantasy - each in some measure depends on the other. To do anything else would be to deny the complexities of our world, and of human identity and nature.

Lutheran historian and theologian Martin Marty identifies two different traditions of what he calls "civic religion" in this country - the priestly (which others have called "Zealous nationalism) and prophetic (or Prophetic realism").

- ◆ Priestly civic religion is identified with the state, it tends to bless the established order, fusing together Christian faith and national sentiments.
- ◆ Prophetic civic religion draws a distinction between traditional faith and the nation, and holds the nation accountable to God's standards and judgements.

Our struggle as Christians is to decide what sort of civic religion we hope to see in this nation: Priestly or Prophetic? Or some subtle combination of both? Does the Church bless the

political order, or does the Church challenge it? These are important questions, because the answers “will determine how we understand justice, peace-making, reconciliation, community, and America’s sense of global vocation” (Diana Butler Bass, “Broken we kneel” p.9).

And a failure on our part to address these questions of civic piety simply leaves the field open to unscrupulous politicians who are perfectly capable of appropriating Christianity for their own ends. “The dynamism and robust nature of faith is [then] lost, and tragically when the state uses religion, the mix often results in inquisitions, violence and war.” (Ibid. P.10)

It was to preserve our freedom to engage in these conversations that our brothers and sisters - “these honored dead” - “gave the last full measure of devotion” on our behalf. To fail, now, to address these difficult questions with integrity and respect, honesty and forthrightness would be a betrayal of their sacrifice, and an abandonment of our responsibility as both citizens and as Christians.

Let us, therefore, commit ourselves to engaging in the challenging task of seeking a common understanding of our faith and our citizenship, and the relationship between the two, especially in the face of the experiences of war that continue to plague our world and our nation.

AMEN