

Pentecost 7, proper 9, Jul3, 2016 - 4th of July weekend. St. Augustine's ini-the-Woods, Freeland
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 66:10-14 Psalm 66:1-8 Galatians 6:1-16 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Almost exactly twenty-five hundred years ago, and about 6,200 miles from here, something new started in a Mediterranean city that is still “a work in progress.” It had two main features: the random selection of ordinary citizens to fill the few existing governmental, administrative, and judicial offices, and a legislative assembly consisting of all citizens. That last word – “citizen” was new in human history. That place was Athens, Greece. The Athenians had a word for this new thing they were doing: “DAmokratia” – democracy. There are four main principles: legal equality, political freedom, public participation, and the rule of law. Those principles applied to all Athenian citizens. While that word “citizen” wasn’t as expansive then as it is today – women and slaves were excluded, for instance – it *is* a word that has particular freight on this weekend when we celebrate a new birth of freedom on this continent.

How do we define a citizen? The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has reflected on this at some length. He observes that, in a nutshell, the definition of a citizen is somebody who is not a slave: someone whose choices and destiny aren’t owned by someone else; someone who has a voice in the community, who is protected as an individual by the law and who can in some significant degree decide the circumstances of their personal life. A slave is someone who enjoys none of those privileges. And they are privileges – we assume that they are only rights, but that’s only half the story. If we sever the recognition of citizenship as a privilege from the claim of citizenship to be about personal rights, then we undermine the meaning and value of democracy.

Those characteristics of, and the meanings of, citizenship show up in the New Testament. St Paul is consistently able to avoid bullying and torture at the hands of Roman soldiers and administrators by reminding them that he is actually a Roman Citizen and that therefore there are certain things that they cannot do to him. And he took the idea of citizenship and incorporated it into his understanding of what it meant to be a part of the Jesus movement of his time.

In the early Church, the idea of citizenship was central – you might not be a citizen of the Empire, but you were a citizen of something, and that “something” Paul calls a *politeia (Pol-it-A-a)*, a political unit, and your citizenship was given from God in that political unit, the new community of the new creation. For us, we should never forget that Christianity from the very start said that there is another *polis*, another city, another political unit – the Body of Christ – in which, whatever our status in the secular communities of this world, we each have non-negotiable rights and dignities: we each have a voice, a gift to share, we “each have the dignity of being a decision-maker and a capacity to build and sustain the environment in which [we] each find [ourselves].” (Williams) Fundamentally this is what the metaphor of the Body of Christ means.

The Body of Christ is a community of the human imagination where we’re called to “‘image’ and imagine [ourselves] in a particular way,” (Williams) a way which will define how we engage with-and-in all the other communities of which we’re a part – including the national community.

Our “citizenship in heaven” (Phil 3:20a) Paul says, and that citizenship teaches us how we engage in the “DAmokratia” – the democracy – of our local community, our region, and our nation. We can only truly be citizens of the United States of America and share in the process of democracy that defines our nation if we do so out of our citizenship in heaven, with all the responsibilities, virtues, and gifts that come from our Godly identity.

The virtues that Paul outlined in last week’s epistle – “the fruit of the Spirit” – is as good a place as any to start: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. On the basis of these virtues, Paul told the Galatians, they should engage the world around them. For Paul – and he got this from Jesus – true faith isn’t an opting-out of politics, a “have-no-opinion” attitude that, today, is frequently proclaimed by those who misunderstand what our Constitution and Bill of Rights says about the relationship between the nation-state and Religion. It says that the Nation-state shall not favor any religion. It does not say that religion has no say in, or involvement in, the Nation-state.

What our faith demands of us – yes, demands of us – is not opting-out but opting-in, and doing so with a particular set of values, another kind of political identity and vision that comes from God and our faith in God.

Most particularly, Paul says, we should not remove ourselves from the various civic responsibilities that belong to us as citizens of our nation; rather it is only by immersing ourselves in our faith that we learn the deepest kind of civic responsibility and civic virtue – those that come from God. It’s only when we learn the citizenship values of the *Polis tou Theou*, the “City of God” that we can fully be citizens of the *Polis tou anthropotAta* the “City of Humanity,” this nation.

Sometimes this is a real challenge, because the political expectations of the nation-state and the political identity of being a Christian are not always the same. Our nation imprisoned those Americans who, based on their religious convictions, refused to fight in World War One , for example. And acts of civil disobedience during the struggle for civil rights in the South often led to illegal imprisonment, judicial beatings and, sometimes, death, for Christians – which is what happened to Episcopal seminarian Jonathan Myrick Daniels, who was murdered by a sheriff’s deputy fifty years ago in Haynesville Alabama at the height of the struggle in the South. It is entirely appropriate to describe him as a martyr for the values he learned as a citizen of heaven, and which he showed on that day.

And sometimes the political expectations of our nation and the political identity of being a Christian turn out to be the same, or, at least, very similar. This shouldn’t surprise us, since the first generation of European immigrants were all Christians, and so many of the Founders of this nation were Christians. And the principles on which our secular democracy is based – legal equality, political freedom, public participation, and the rule of law – have much in common with the values of Christian community and identity that come from being citizens of heaven.

In the end, this Fourth of July Weekend turns out to be a little more of a challenge for us as Christians than we might have thought. Our faith calls us to live in a particular way, a Godly

way, and to interpret the demands of our secular citizenship in that light, not the other way around. It means that our faith must judge the way the communal merits of legal equality, political freedom, public participation, and the rule of law are worked out in our nation, and having judged them, seek to honor and support them in every way that is in accord with what it means to be citizens of heaven – and to oppose them when they contradict our faith in God. If we can get that right (by bringing those values of the City of God into the City of Humanity, into our nation) then – as citizens of heaven – we can most fully *also* be faithful citizens of the United States of America.