

Sermon – St. Mark’s – July 3, 2016  
Matthew 5:43-48  
David S. Deutsch

In recent years, I have changed my attitude toward the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Instead of regarding the holiday as simply a day off and a party, my attitude has deepened. How did this happen? Simply by watching the Capitol Hill Community parade that takes place on 8<sup>th</sup> Street SE. I have come to see the Fourth of July as a national holiday that is really a series of local events each of which captures regional and very local flavor of the United States. I have come to see it as a microcosm of America. Maybe you all can think of the Fourth of July where you lived and how it represented your hometown or neighborhood.

Yes indeed. I look forward with a kind of inexplicable pride when at 10am on the morning of the Fourth that parade starts with kids yelling, “It’s coming.” And the crowd on the sidewalk surges forward. And you begin to hear some marching music off in the distance. I’ll come back to 8<sup>th</sup> Street SE in a moment. First I want to express just two ideas that come to mind as I hear these very powerful and thoughtful readings and, for me, both help bind together Christianity and America.

**ONE**

It seems to me that the core of Christianity and the central ethos of the United States is the same: Radical Hospitality. Jesus, who ate with sinners (that’s you and I!), healed gentiles as well as Israelites, eschewed dietary law to eat with others, who did not rest on the Sabbath to heal others, Jesus practiced a most radical hospitality. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus made it clear to the scribe, who asked him, “What is the greatest commandment of all?” Jesus answered, “‘You shall love your God with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Pretty clear. And look at our gospel reading where Jesus bluntly say—and I want to quote Jesus as translated by Eugene Patterson in his contemporary Bible, *The Message*:

If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. In a word, what I am saying is *Grow up*. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God created identity. Live generously, and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

Now look at the opening line of our Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal." As you well know this principle has been expanding for over two hundred years. But it has been able to do so because of this underlying principle. Also, when hear these words, I hearken back to the creation story in the book of Genesis: male and female he created them and pronounced them good.

And look at our reading from George Washington's address to the Hebrew congregation at Newport, Rhode Island. He said in the United States that bigotry has no sanction and persecution has no assistance if we behave as good citizens supporting one another.

I also think of Emma Lazarus' poem *The New Colossus* which is on a plaque in the statue of liberty a portion of which says,

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses  
yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse your  
teaming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed  
to me I'll lift my lamp beside me beside the golden  
door."

I love the phrase "Give me. It is so much stronger than mere tolerance. It is an invitation—No, really a demand for immigrants from other lands who are suffering.

Yes, I believe that this country and our faith share the common core of radical hospitality. Justice grounds the former; love grounds the latter. As good Christians and as good citizens we are to act with kindness and without contempt toward all peoples.

Now, radical hospitality is difficult to practice. Leading a Christian life and being a good citizen is extraordinarily hard. Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address tells us we must strive on to continue to heal the wounds of war and achieve a lasting peace among us and among all nations. We cannot coast; we must strive.

Martin Luther King's letter also makes this burningly clear. The bottom line is that we have to dig in and work both for our church and our country. We do not want our churches to become country clubs. And I might add that we do not want our country to ignore "And Justice for all."

## TWO

Secondly, underlying both Christianity and the United States is the call to be countercultural if necessary. After all this country was founded by a revolution—the first Brexit if you will. Jesus died precisely because he preached a countercultural message that scared the Roman authorities. If we are to be authentic Christians and good citizens, we will find ourselves advocating activities and protests which can seem countercultural and scary to many: Bus Boycotts, Sit-ins, Black Lives Matter, Gun Control, LBGT rights. Revolution is in the DNA of Christianity and of the United States of America.

Before I return to the parade I want to end with Nicholas Black Elk and Verna Dozier. Both challenge us in different ways.

Black Elk reminds us to try to see the universe as a one-ness. He writes,

...I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things  
in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live  
together like one being.

For Black Elk distinctions between the sacred and the secular fall away. And Black Elk points out the central paradox of life: How do we live our lives as individuals achieving our fullest potential as may be best for us and also be part of the whole in which this life potential is allowed to take place. This is certainly true in the church as we are all on our own spiritual journey but doing it in a community that nurtures us.

Verna Dozier, the nationally known theologian, member of St. Mark's, and the first African-American on the vestry, Verna challenges us prophetically. She writes:

God came into history to create a people who would change the world, who would make the world a place where every person knew that he or she was loved, was valued, had a contribution to make, and had just as much right to the riches of the world as every other person.

We are challenged as only Verna can challenge us.

Back to the parade...it is coming: The Marine Corps Band, The Eastern High School band, the dancers from Honduras with their brightly colored costumes, the old cars, the Capitol Hill Continentals which as kids and adults alike dressed in period costumes—some tootling on fifes and some banging on drums, The BID (Business Improvement District) folk with their big blue trashcans dispensing candy to one and all, The Miss Pre-Teens, Greyhounds of Capitol Hill with their sleek dogs, Maury Elementary School, Little kids are waving flags, The Sahajay Meditation group, girl scout troops, wait...there's Kit Arrington in her totally patriotically decorated car, kids on their dad's shoulders to see better, a fire engine, an enormous tuba...

And here's the deal. If I squint my eyes, I can honestly feel that I am getting a glimpse of the Kingdom of God here on earth, here in the USA, here in DC, here on 8<sup>th</sup> Street SE. *Amen.*