



July 4, 2010
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

*American Christians or Christian Americans?**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 30 Galatians 6:(1-6), 7-16 Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

The epistle lesson says, "Whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." Work for the good of all...universal care...but especially for, specifically for, those of the family of faith.

On this rare occasion—a July 4th Sunday—I thought it might do us good to stand for a moment at the intersection of church and state—and ponder and pray over the overlap and maybe tension, of our dual citizenship of Christians. We are people of loyalties that pull on us as patriotic Americans; but also we claim and are claimed by allegiances that embrace us as part of God's great family that transcends national boundaries and our nation's brief history as disciples of Christ.

I know the topic is sort of an "eat your spinach" issue on a grilled hot dogs and homemade peach ice cream day. But we need some roughage as a part of our healthy diet. For on this day our diet will also include nourishment from this table, the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation.

Now, don't pull-out your Blackberries or I Phones to check it right now, but the next time July 4th will fall on a Sunday is 2021. 11 years from now. So, let's eat our spinach.

One way of describing this work-out at the intersection of church and state is in the sermon's title: Would you say that you are a Christian American? Or would you say that you are

an American Christian? You might ask, who cares? Or what's the difference? And some might even say, they're about one and the same anyway...aren't they?

I had a flashback to ole' Carlyle Marney, a patron saint of progressive, liberal Baptists, to my generation. When I moved to Northside Drive, one of our own, John Powell, gave me a bushel basket full of Marney tapes, from the days he pastored at Myers Park in Charlotte. As folk used to say, Marney's voice sounded a lot like God's voice...only deeper.

When asked to comment on being Baptist, Marney said, "the word *Baptist* is good word, but it is an adjective, not a noun; and I never give noun status to an adjective."

Do you hear what he was saying? He was a Baptist Christian. Christian is the noun, Baptist was the modifier, the qualifier.

That grammatical nuance has always helped me as I tried to figure out where I stood in an ecumenical and pluralistic world. I am a Christian who lives life in a quirky Baptist kind of way.

When I keep straight what is a noun and what is an adjective, that rule also helps me describe where I stand on the landscape of being a patriotic American while being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

American Christian, or Christian American?

Well, the New Testament is clear, the claims of Christ and the claim of Christ upon our lives—trumps all other claims. All other duties must take a number and stand in line.

Take the epistle lesson today: "bear one another's burdens and fulfill the law of Christ," "may I never boast in anything except the Cross of Christ." "To be a new creation in Christ is everything to me."

Reinhold Niebuhr, church pastor and seminary professor struggled with this tension. He was proud to be an American, but he also was a prophet to America warning in the post-war 50's against nationalistic self-righteousness.

William Sloane Coffin, former pastor of Riverside Church in NY had a similar stance. While sitting in a missionary's living room in South Africa I read Coffin's words, "There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world."

"Whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."

One of the ways I stay in love with America is to see it as a work in progress...even as I am and our families are and our church is...a work in progress. I don't see American values as something we need to get back to...I see them as something we need to get on with. Not get back to...but to get on with.

As an American Christian that sounds like "whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."

We have spacious skies, amber waves of grain, and purple mountain majesties. But also in our declaration we declare that "all men, all persons are created equal." I've always thought it beautiful that our founders wrote words and values into our DNA that are larger than they could have ever comprehended. All of the founders were slaveholders...and yet hidden in their own words was the antibiotic that would take down the peculiar institution of slavery in which our country was born addicted. By "all men" they meant white, property owning, males; but they meant more than they knew.

As Alan Neely, an Alliance of Baptist missiologist at Princeton used to say, Baptists like John Leland who influenced James Madison who influenced Thomas Jefferson, helped bank roll an equity of religious freedom so that no only did Baptists learn to draw upon it, but people of all faiths and also those with none.

“Whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

I overheard a conversation between two colleagues last week. The new rabbi of The Temple in Atlanta, Peter Berg, and his predecessor, Jeffery Salkin. They were talking about the patriarchs in Genesis: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. And they mentioned the little spoken-of father of Abraham, Terah. He leaves to go to the land of Canaan, but never makes it. He stops in Haran and settles there. It is the next generation, Abraham that picks up the journey.

“What do you think that means?” asked one of the rabbis. And the other one said, “I think it means that the dream, the family’s dream, can never be completed in one generation.” Each generation has to do its part.

That’s it, I thought. America is a work in progress, in progress—not to get back to American values, but get on with American values as we address the difficult issues from warfare to welfare to healthcare to the great tragedy along the Gulf Coast.

And as an American Christian, I and maybe we, with the nourishment we receive from one another and the sustenance we get from this Lord’s Table, can continue to be about “whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the common good of all....”

*These are some of the notes James Lamkin used in preaching this morning’s sermon.