

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Living in Two Worlds”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
July 3, 2016

Luke 10:1-16
Psalm 146

He wouldn't let them do it. Duncan would never let them decorate the sanctuary like a 4th of July float. Every year at my former congregation there were people who would go to my predecessor, Duncan Stewart, and ask to decorate the sanctuary on the Sunday closest to the 4th of July, so that it was awash in red, white and blue. Yet every year Duncan would turn them down, which was, at least on the surface, a bit odd. It was odd because if anyone loved this nation, it was Duncan. I say this because he spent 30 years in the Army, rising to the rank of Colonel. He had earned a bronze Star and purple heart in the Pacific in World War II. He then served in both Korea and Vietnam. In other words, this was a man who loved his nation so much that he had risked his life on multiple occasions. For whatever reason, I never had a conversation with Duncan specifically about this issue, but I think I have an idea why he declined to decorate in this way, and it had to do with his realization that we are living in two worlds...the world of nation-hood and the world of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

If that seems a bit obtuse I hope that our morning's lesson will help shed some light on what I mean. As our story opens Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem and the final showdown with the religious and secular authorities. As he does so he can sense around him the growing calls for revolution against Rome. Throughout his life-time there had been would be messiahs who called upon the people to rise up and defeat Rome. The result was they and their followers had all died. (And unfortunately only about thirty-three years after his death the entire nation would rise up and hundreds of thousands of people would lose their lives in a futile rebellion.) So as Jesus proceeds he sends out a message that calls the people to peace and not violence. He tells them that the Kingdom of God is already present in and through his life and work. In other words, they do not need to be politically independent to be at peace. Thus when Jesus speaks of judgment against individuals and cities that refuse his peace, he is speaking of the coming cataclysm with Rome and not punishment from God. He has come as the Prince of Peace and not a military messiah.

These then, as I said a moment ago, are the two worlds in which we live. We live in the world of human revolutions that are waged for freedom; freedom to worship as we please, freedom to make our own laws, freedom to speak our minds and freedom to pursue our own dreams and destinies, the freedoms which we enjoy and often take for granted. This world is one that tens of thousands of men and women have fought and died for. This world is one that we are called upon to celebrate and appreciate. Yet we also live in the other world, that is in the world of Jesus Christ, who called upon us to love and pray for our enemies, not return violence with violence, to not hate, but to love, and to realize that true peace is not found in revolutions but is found in the peace that God gives through God's only Son Jesus; a peace that passes all understanding. What Duncan understood was that our task is find a balance which honors both without allowing one to consume the other.

Here is what I mean. If we allow the world of revolutions to become the only world, then we risk being led down a path toward being a people who will do anything to anyone in order to maintain our national security. We will resort to torture and conquest. We will attack and seek to destroy anyone we deem to be the enemy. We will demonize “the other” because they are not like us. And in so doing we run the risk of losing our souls in the name of freedom. At the same time, we run great risks if we choose a pacifism in the name of the Prince of Peace. We

risk allowing the real evil in this world to run amok, dealing death wherever it turns. We run the risk of allowing injustice to have its way, while we fail to protect the widow, the orphan and vulnerable. We run the risk of losing our souls as we watch the innocent suffer knowing that we could have done something to prevent it.

We live in two worlds. We live in the world of political freedom and obligation as well as the world of the Prince of Peace who calls us to a particular way of life. The challenge for us, as I said, is to find a balance between the two; which is never easy. It is never easy because there will always be competing claims upon us from both sides as well as moral decisions, whose appropriate outcome is difficult to discern. Yet we are still called to try to find that balance.

This Fourth of July weekend then I encourage you to do three things. First to give thanks and celebrate the freedoms that have been given. Second, to give thanks to God for the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ that offers us peace even in a war torn world. Thirdly, I challenge you to ask yourself this question, "How am I finding the balance in my life such that I honor the freedoms I have and the Savior of the world who gave his life for me?"