

## THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: THE CHARACTER OF A NATION

Ephesians 2: 19-22

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To whom, to what, do you pledge allegiance? To whom, to what, have you promised to be loyal?

If you were baptized as an adult, or an older child - as I was - then you made promises to profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and renounce the powers of evil. New members of the church make promises to support the church and to follow in the ways of Jesus. When we walk into this sanctuary, the baptismal font serves as a reminder of our baptismal vows. Almost every time I walk out of the sanctuary, I touch the living water and make the sign of the cross on my forehead. It is my way of reminding myself that I want to live as a follower of Jesus **both** inside these walls **and** outside. In this room, we sing and pray and listen to sacred stories. We take into our bodies words and symbols of spiritual nourishment. We pray to be transformed by the practices of our faith, and we pray that what we do in **here** makes us different people **out there**. We pledge our loyalty to the Christian way of life, fully aware of how difficult it is to live our values in a confused, confusing, and chaotic world.

We have other loyalties and allegiances too. Some of us have made promises to spouses, vows to love in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. People who have their children baptized make specific promises, and everyone who becomes a parent implicitly promises to care for that child's needs.

What do we do when our different loyalties and allegiances conflict with each other? It actually happens often. Most young parents I know experience this within the first few

weeks of their first child's life. Their relationship with each other becomes secondary all of a sudden, because the child's needs are so urgent and all-consuming. And from then on, the two spouses realize that honoring their relationship will require constant negotiation and many difficult decisions.

Beau and I were in a conversation with a few young families last week and they talked about how hard it is for them to make decisions about how to spend their time. How can they honor the commitments they've made to their employers and also be the kind of spouses and parents they want to be?

And then there are the commitments we make to our parents, our friends, the organizations we believe in...and on and on it goes.

Decisions about how we spend our time - that topic is ripe for a whole sermon, or maybe even a whole sermon series. Today we're going to focus on the other kinds of difficult choices. What do we do about the philosophical kinds of competing allegiances? I'm talking, as I'm sure you've guessed, on this day before July 4th, about how to be **both** a good citizen **and** a person who embodies the values Jesus taught and lived.

It's a dilemma at least as old as Jesus. He often talked about God's values like compassion and justice, concern for the poor and those who are forgotten and neglected. Those values were antithetical to the values of the Roman Empire, the ruling government. Jesus talked about being "in" but not "of" the world, about being very clear about what allegiance people owed their government and what allegiance people owed God.

The Roman Empire treated poor Galileans like Jesus as pawns. Rome taxed unfairly, Rome created an atmosphere of fear in an attempt to squelch any dissension. Rome was intent on gouging as much money as it could and gaining more and more

power. Help the rich get richer and help the powerful get more powerful. Jesus saw nothing of value in the way Rome was governing. He knew the scriptures inside and out. He remembered the laws God gave to Moses - "this is how you set up a new community, Moses. You make sure that those who are most vulnerable are given the most attention. You care first and foremost for widows, orphans and refugees. You create a community where people respect one another - so there is no stealing, no lying, no cheating." Jesus looked at Rome and saw nothing of God's laws represented.

So Jesus went about creating his own community. "We'll live as if we are under God's reign. We'll share freely with one another. We'll treat everyone equally, whether they're landowners or women or children." And when Jesus encountered someone who worked for Rome, he tried to engage in dialogue with him. He sat down with government officials and tried to get to know them. He saw them as people. He disagreed with their politics, vehemently, but he didn't shun them.

One of my friends and colleagues wrote a pastoral letter last week to the congregation he serves, about the Roe v. Wade decision. Among other statements, he said this:

"Friends, pray for guidance as to how you will seek to right injustice, but also for the wisdom to listen to those who have a different perspective. Because in the end, I believe that the path of both advocacy **and** listening is essential for a community of faith, and one that helps us to write a biography of grace. Let us seek, with God's help, to live into the saying that, unless we can imagine honor and integrity in those with whom we disagree, we are likely to be incapable of those qualities ourselves." Unless we can imagine honor

and integrity in those with whom we disagree, we are likely to be incapable of those traits ourselves.

Last week, my sermon focused on personal integrity. I encouraged each of us to engage in a personal audit - considering what is it we each have to give, and where our passions are - and then becoming involved. That advocacy is the call to each of us as Christians and as citizens.

One of the great gifts of personal involvement is that it leads us in a positive direction. Asking ourselves, "What is mine to do?" keeps us away from more destructive thoughts like, "Who is to blame for America's problems?"

I don't know about you, but I am **tired** of the culture of blame. Everything is the fault of the other political party. Everything is the fault of a particular president. Everything is the fault of people who wanted too much to change too quickly. Let's blame recent immigrants, let's blame the far left, let's blame the far right. Blaming doesn't get us anywhere. Or rather, blaming makes everything worse. It makes it harder for us to find common ground and work together. We certainly don't see Jesus going around and pointing fingers at those with whom he disagreed.

There's another behavior that is equally unproductive. It's the other side of blame. It's what we do when we say, "When are we going to have better leaders?" "Why don't more good people get involved?" "Who is going to stand up and speak against racial injustice? Who is going to do something about economic inequality?"

The character of this nation is not determined by the character of the person occupying the oval office at any given time. The character of a nation is not determined by the nine justices sitting on the Supreme Court at any given time. Or the 50 senators. The

character of this nation is mostly determined by the actions and values of its citizens. In other words, us.

As I read through the Bible about what God had to say about communities, about how people should live together, about how God created the first nation to serve as a model for others, and the kind of community Jesus formed around him, I keep remembering these words of Gandhi. I realize he was neither a Christian or an American, but these words reflect biblical values and the values of many in our nation, now and throughout history: "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members."

Who are the people in these United States today who are speaking up on behalf of those who are most vulnerable? Who ARE the most vulnerable? What is ours to do? What is mine? What is yours?

Let us pray. Holy God, Divine Wisdom, guide us in your paths. Give us humility to recognize our own complicity and give us the courage to change our ways. Help us to work with one another towards the common good, remembering above everything else, your call for us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, and our Example. Amen.