

Sunday, July 5, 2020
Sermon Series: Didn't See It Coming

When Our Freedoms as Americans Keep Bumping Up Against Each Other
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1 Peter 2:9-17 NRSV

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹²Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

¹³For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

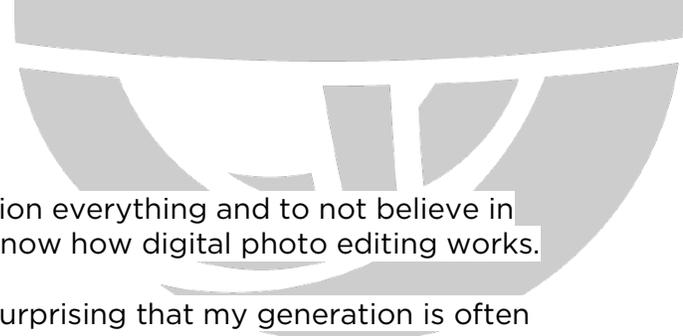
So, I am a millennial-barely. According to generation theory I just made the cut by one year actually... As a child we watched the gulf war on TV and a president impeached for sexual misconduct. My sophomore year of High School our country was shaken by a major school shooting. I began college 3 weeks before September 11, 2001.

And because I am an old millennial, I was raised by parents who lived and served through the Vietnam War and several social movements and uprisings.

My grandmothers would tell me about their role as women and wives during WWII. Our generation grew into young adulthood in a war that seemed to last forever and as the internet exploded globally, as we elected our first black president and as the economy soared and then really tanked.

At the same time our country and churches fought over inclusion and child abuse scandals and coverups.





We were also taught to be critical thinkers-to question everything and to not believe in something just because you can see it-after all we know how digital photo editing works.

So, all I am saying here is that It should not be too surprising that my generation is often somewhat skeptical of institutions.

Given all this if I am honest, I have always really wrestled a bit with my relationship to patriotism and the idea of American freedom-I partially blame amazing my boomer parents...

What's also true...I deeply love this nation I call home. It's truly beautiful from sea to shining sea. I love 4th of July and proudly have a red, white and blue star on my front door. I am guessing like some of you I watched Hamilton this past weekend and am really totally captivated by the story of the birth of our nation- built on religious freedom, a system dreamt up by a few young adults over drinks (or something like that), and I love this democratic experiment that believes it's possible that we could build a more perfect union that provided liberty and justice for all and where we have freedom to believe our own truths, make change, push back on authorities if needed and believe differently. I still believe in that dream.

There has been a deeper wrestling of my soul though-and I first remember it bubbling up for me in college-we were in the midst of the Iraqi War-my ROTC friends we're preparing for their lives post college where they would be fighting for our country in a controversial war across the world. These were close friends and I loved them, admired their service to our country immensely and coveted their safety.

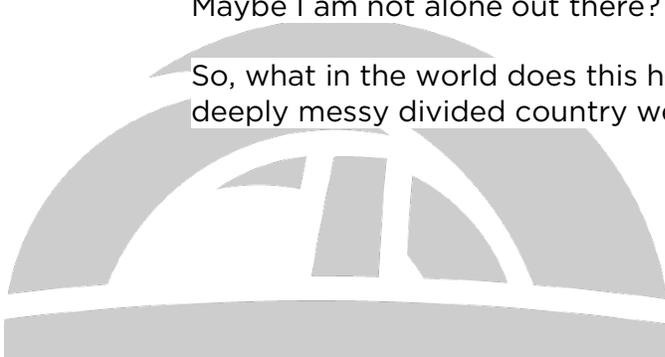
At that same time, I was in the midst of what I would call perhaps an awakening of my faith-a time where I was wrestling with my faith in a new way. I was reading a lot of scripture and really seeking who Jesus was to me and the world. I was trying to figure out what he might say about what was happening in our country.

I began to feel uncomfortable with a lot of the political and church rhetoric- where I felt like God's name was being used as a reason to go to war. I watched xenophobia take hold in our nation, and I saw a lot of red, white and blue crosses not just on graves but being used as the ideal one and only way of being American-like if you didn't follow Jesus you were a threat to our country.

I found myself holding these things constantly in tension as a young adult. My love of country and this incredible nation and the people who serve it and my skepticism of institutions and the mixture of God and nation and patriotism that made me some days queasy.

Spoiler alert. I still do wrestle with this all and hold it all in tension.

Maybe I am not alone out there?



So, what in the world does this have to do with 1 Peter chapter 2 and the beautiful yet deeply messy divided country we're living in 2020?



Turns out this personal wrestling of mine was nothing new or special. God's people throughout time have tried to figure out their relationship to the empire and government institutions and authorities.

Early in the story of Israel God people tried to figure out how they should relate to Kings. Wars tore tribes and communities apart. People were freed from living under an oppressive ruler. New laws and commandments were created to give guidance on how we are to relate to God and neighbor. Temples were built and destroyed. Prophets were sent to speak truth to the powerful and privileged and comfort and love to the marginalized and scared.

And this was all before Jesus. Enter Jesus and he preached peace and a kin-dom that turned just about every societal norm (and many of God's laws too) upside down. He said yes, of course, we should give to Caesar what belongs to him like tax money - but also don't forget to give to God what is God's.

Jesus obviously cared and loved and welcomed the empire fringe as he healed the centurion's servant and called tax collectors as disciples. Jesus knew our relationship, as God's people, to the empire would be really tricky- after all his was.

And let's of course be real...as Jesus' ministry of love and peace and freedom became too much of a threat to the empire they killed him for it.

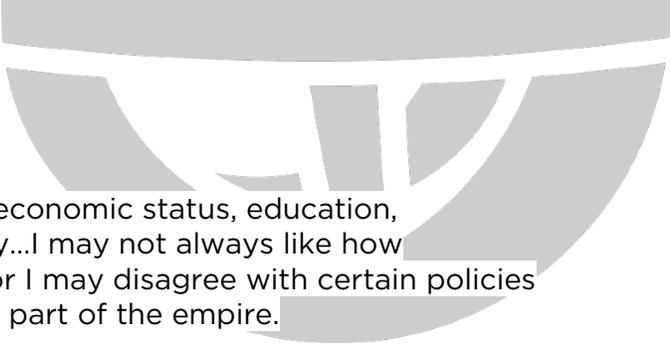
And the early church-well they wrestled with this tension too-as the church became inclusive of both Jew and Gentile-slave and free-man and woman-the already muddy just got muddier. They wrestled with questions of purity codes, instructions on how to care for the foreigner, and how to be in relationship with each other as family, spouses, church folk, and neighbor (believer and not).

This weird relationship has been part of our story as God's people from the beginning, but at every step God constantly reminded them (whether God's people created a colossal mess or a holy moment and got it right) that they- that we -belong to God. Our identity is with God. And our true freedom from sin and death-it comes from God too. We we're once far off, but now we have received mercy.

This 1 Peter text moves from this beautiful spiritual and theological language to getting to very practical and nitty gritty quick-spiritually speaking, probably most of us have a sense our freedom and allegiance belongs to God, but perhaps like the early church living and worshiping in Rome we too need some really practical ways to relate to human institutions and authorities and how as God's people exercise our freedom....

Okay, friends, if you're waiting for me to give you some easy answers-let me apologize right now-you're going to be disappointed. But, I will invite you to join me in some challenging spiritual practices that might help us with wrestle on how to get there... First, I invite you to engage in some confession and repentance...why? Martin Luther reminded us really early on that we live in two kingdoms. We are both God's people and for most of us we also identify as American.





I am a person of privilege (thanks to my race, socio-economic status, education, ableness, religion) and several other privileges I carry...I may not always like how America, Minnesota, or Rochester mistreats people or I may disagree with certain policies or laws -but I am part of the powerful- and therefore part of the empire.

That privilege is true for many of you too, right? And the dreams of the empire? They become part of our DNA if we realize it or not. And if you have been paying attention this spring- or for the past several hundred years -the empire has some things to repent about.

The practice of confession and repentance reminds us first that we belong to God and that we need Jesus. It also invites us to turn inward and look at how our lives and actions are affecting our close and distant neighbors. And invites us to move forward differently.

Repentance makes us ask hard questions about how we have participated in racist or other harmful ideologies. It invites us to wrestle with privilege and how we have intentionally or passively engaged in harm.

It also invites us to repent when we may have in fact used our freedom for evil-when I/we have chosen to do what is easy and what is convenient instead of looking to what's best for my neighbor and community...

This practice also makes me confess that there are times I haven't seen our government leaders, especially ones that I disagree with, as the Children of God that they are. I don't have to bow to them or agree with them and I can certainly question their leadership, but I am called to recognize their humanity and dignity as God's children.

Confession and repentance are one way to reorder our lives and priorities. And let's be real it's hard to confess that what might bring us power and ease might be at the expense of the vulnerable other. But we are reminded the truth shall set us (and turns out others too) free.

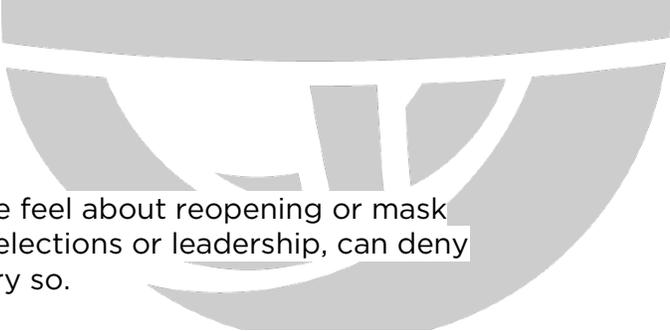
Second, I would invite us to be third way thinkers. Some of you might be familiar with this way of thinking and some may not. It's a model of leadership that's incredibly important when we find ourselves in any relationship or community where conflict and group think is present.

Basically, it invites you to think beyond left or right, yes or no, this way or no way.

It makes us stay engaged in relationship and conversation and disagreement. It's a way of peace and bridge building. It's not either or thinking but instead leaves room for a third option. Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian and author says this about it...

"Today we Americans need to find a Third Way. That does not mean making cheap compromises, as in, "I'll stop caring about the poor if you'll stop caring about more money for the military." Instead it means holding our differences in ways that opens us to possibilities we never would have imagined if we had failed to hang in with each other."





Friends, I don't think any of us, regardless of what we feel about reopening or mask wearing, or protests or taking down monuments, or elections or leadership, can deny that we're really deeply divided as a nation. Like scary so.

Perhaps as people of faith we can willingly stay in hard conversations and "present third ways of thinking"? Such deep division and constant 2-way thinking will only lead us to dead ends and to banging our head against the same walls.

Yet, when we prayerfully think in third ways...things are given space to pivot and relationships remain central, and new ways of being are birthed.

The Spirit of God has created and sent us to be dreamers and prophets and teachers and healers and spiritual midwives-let us not settle to use those gifts for anything less than the beauty and goodness and way of love they were sent for-to set others free.

The very spirit of God is a third way thinker. Let us lean into her gifts in us and among us. Jesus was a third thinker-let us lean into his way of love and peace and life.

This Third Way work is hard work and will invite disagreement, soul wrestling, and plenty of prayer and inward looking, but will also invite us to move closer to perhaps the world that God dreams for us-a place where abundant life is for all.

Let me leave you with this...If 2020 has taught us nothing else-maybe this is enough-that we're deeply connected, and our freedom is connected in ways we couldn't barely imagine a few months ago. Claiming that I am only as free as my neighbor may not be the way of American individualism. In fact it may come regularly in conflict with it, but it seems the way of neighbor love and the way of Jesus and it's why Paul says in Ephesians 5: ³*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.* ¹⁴*For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

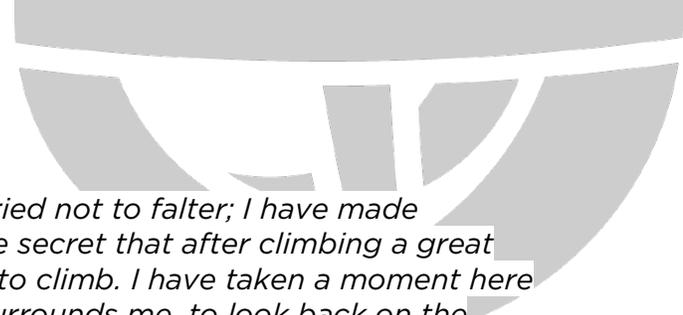
Most of scripture, especially in the new testament, when it says you-it actually should be translated as the plural you-like y'all....Jesus, the Church, our faith as God's holy people continually points us to the y'all-my freedom is wrapped up in my neighbors freedom, your freedom is wrapped up in mine-being a follower of Jesus is a team sport.

And I think perhaps too... this communal freedom-this granting of space to the other to thrive and be who they are created to be ... was at least, in part, at the heart of the ideal our nation was built on...

Freedom is a long road. We're really far from getting to that ideal - we have a lot of work to do before we can claim all in our country are free to thrive- but remembering our connectedness-remembering I am only free if you too are free perhaps gets us moving in the right direction.

As Nelson Mandela said in his autobiography as he reflected work in dismantling apartheid in South Africa...





I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

Amen.

