

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday, July 4, 2010

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 9C 2010

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the interest of time, today's sermon will be briefer than usual since we have just participated in the reading of two foundational documents – The reading of the Declaration of Independence since it is the Fourth of July and the renewal of our Baptismal Covenant, which is the heart of our Book of Common Prayer.

The opening words of the Declaration of independence – “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” – are among the most quoted words in the English language. The remainder of the Declaration consists largely of a list of grievances against King George III and the government of Great Britain that the colonists found unendurable and justifying the severance of all ties with Great Britain.

Most people don't know that while the Fourth of July has always been celebrated for our Independence, the language of the Declaration was ignored if not forgotten. Beginning in the 1820's groups such as poor farmers and workmen demanding fair wages appealed to its language. In 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY, a group of woman working for women's right to vote declared, “All men and women are created equal”.

However, it was the debates over slavery and extending slavery into the new territories of the West that brought the language of the Declaration to the forefront of our national consciousness again. Abraham Lincoln thought the Declaration was a founding document of this Nation and worthy of veneration. To him, it was this Nation's moral compass. We can thank Abraham Lincoln for making the Declaration's opening statement, penned by Jefferson, the lens through which we view our Constitution.

We also read another foundational document – of our Faith – our Baptismal Covenant. The first part is the Apostle's Creed. It is the oldest commonly accepted statement of the Christian faith. It's what the youth would call "the talk". The second part is what the youth would call "the walk", our actions that result from our faith.

Both these documents show that our ideas and our ideals matter – they are the lens that give us our identity. They inform us of what we see in the world and they guide our actions. Our actions reveal our values. Our values reveal our self-identity. Our identity shows the world what we believe ourselves to be.

Our reading from the Second Book of Kings is an example of how our ideas matter. Not to be disrespectful of the Bible, but today's story of the cleansing of the General Naaman by Elisha reminds me of an I Love Lucy episode. Everybody is so sure of who they are that they are blind to the reality that surround them. The kings in the story are self-important and view life through that lens. Naaman the General afflicted with leprosy believes himself totally in charge. He marches off to see Elisha with a great retinue loaded with gold and riches. His cure is important so it is worth a lot. What a spectacle that must have been.

But you'll notice that the only ones who see clearly are the servants in the story. The slave girl from Israel knows that God has empowered the Prophet Elisha with power to heal. Naaman's servants know enough to remind Naaman that a cure doesn't have to be grandiose to be effective. Elisha knew that he was a servant of God and that it is God who heals. He didn't even come to the door – he wanted Naaman to learn that it is God that is always in charge and that God can do wonders.

What we believe is the lens through which we see the world. A candidate for Bishop of Hawai'i during the last election said a wise thing. She said that when we come to believe in God – it changes everything. When we believe that God loves us – it changes everything. When we believe that each and every one of us (no exceptions!) is a child of God – it changes everything! That's what the Baptismal Covenant means and it has changed the world.

In 1776, the Declaration and its core beliefs turned subjects of a hereditary monarchy and aristocracy into citizens of a democratic society. That change in belief about the nature and status of human beings was too powerful to remain in the British Colonies. It has transformed the world.

Amen.