

Faith and the Flag

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16-20

Today is one of those Sundays when the church faces a bit of a dilemma.

On the church calendar, it is Trinity Sunday,

though I doubt many of us woke up this morning thinking of today as Trinity Sunday.

More than likely we awoke remembering that tomorrow is America's

national Memorial Day,

a day to remember those who have given their lives in the service of our country
to preserve the ideals we hold dear.

For some, perhaps, the main thought was that tomorrow is a day off from work.

(I have to be honest and say that my first thought when I woke up

was of the carrier top on the roof of our car, packed and ready to go on vacation!)

At first it may seem that we must choose between these two holidays,

Trinity Sunday and Memorial Day,

and focus on only one .

But I believe there are ways that these two days are very much related

for Christians in America.

The doctrine of the Trinity –

God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit –

is a world-affirming, world-embracing doctrine.

This doctrine leads us to affirm that the God made known in Jesus Christ,

and the God who is present in the church through the presence of the Holy Spirit,

is the same God who created the whole world,

and who governs the whole world,

and who sustains the whole world.

The doctrine of the Trinity leads the church

not into withdrawal from the world God created and loves,

but into a stance of faithful participation in God's good world.

And in this world, that means faithful participation in and among the nations.

So, on the one hand,

as good Trinitarians we believe that God is at work not just in the church
but also outside the bounds of the church, in the world.

And we can participate in what God is doing in the world.

But, on the other hand, we have to be careful about this participation

especially our participation in and among the nations.

President Harry Truman was known to get tired of this kind of two-handed statement.

He used to complain about his economists, that he wished he had a one-armed economist.

Because he was so tired of people always saying,

“On the one hand, this...”

“On the other hand, that...”

He wanted someone with just one hand to tell him what was really going on in the world.

Theologians are often like economists this way –

we often speak with two hands at the same time.

On the one hand, as Trinitarian believers,

we can participate in what God is doing in the world,

even when it is happening outside the bounds of the church.

because we believe that the eternal Word that forms the church

is the same Word that was in the beginning with God,

and created all things.

On the other hand, we have to be careful about this participation.

As Christians, we always take care – great care – that in our faithful participation

we never forget to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance;

we never forget to whom we as Christian people must be truly and fully devoted.

As Christians, we always remember that there is a difference between

the church and the nation.

Baptism is not an American rite, but a sacrament of the Body of Christ.

I must admit that in my own experience this distinction has not always been so clear.

Growing up I was active in the Boy Scouts.

As a Scout,

I learned reverence for God and loyalty to the nation as twin values.

Faith and Patriotism were, for me, bound up together.

God and Country went hand in hand.

Like the cover of a recent book by theologian Stanley Hauerwas

that shows the Bible wrapped up, almost to the point of being concealed

inside the stars and stripes of the American flag.

For many years, in my thinking, to be a faithful Christian

was never different than simply being a good American citizen.

Today, I would draw the line more carefully between citizenship in the kingdom of God,

and citizenship in any kingdom or nation of this world, including America.

The careful drawing of that line is one reason

we do not bring the American flag into our sanctuary.

When we bow for prayer, it must be clear that we bow before God, and God alone.

There needs to be no confusion about our ultimate allegiance.

It is for this reason that the Barmen Declaration is included

in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions.

This declaration was written in the 1930's by the Confessing Church of Germany

to say that as Christians they could not give their ultimate allegiance to Hitler,

or anyone else for that matter, but only to Jesus Christ as Lord.

But making that distinction does not mean

that one must renounce any participation in the life of the nations.

The doctrine of the Trinity will not allow us to withdraw into the walls of the church,

leaving the rest of the world to go about its business.

If the God who saves us in Jesus Christ

is the same God who creates and sustains the whole world,
then to say that the only way God can accomplish good things is
by working through the church
is to shorten the arm of God.

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In Psalm 8, the Psalmist is clear about his loyalties:

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth...

O Lord our Sovereign – that is, the Lord is our King;

the Lord is the one with final and ultimate authority over us.

But our Lord, our Sovereign has given men and women certain work to do:

*You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet.*

God, the Sovereign Creator of all, has given us – men and women –
a responsibility to fulfill in this world.

We have been given responsibility to take care of the work of God's hands.

The whole world is our concern! And what a tremendous concern it is!

More than that, what an impossible task we mere mortals have been given,
to be responsible for the work of God's hands.

Given the conflicted, divided, violent state of the world,

we might be led into utter despair to think that it is all *our* responsibility.

What can we possibly do?

But the church does not despair. Rather we *hope*.

We are able to hope because we are Trinitarians.

As Trinitarians we do not believe that God has simply set the world in motion,
as if winding up a clock and stepping back to watch it tick, come what may.

The doctrine of the Trinity rejects this view because

the Triune God IS also the Son who *came into the world*.

This is the God we know in Jesus Christ,
who gave his life *for the sake of the world*
who was crucified, dead, and buried, but is now risen from the dead
and whose *Spirit* is now at work not only in the church,
but, as always, in the world.

Far from being a God who is disengaged from the world,
we have seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth,
that God is living and moving right in the middle of the mess we have made.
God is at work in the world, standing on the side of the crucified.
God is a God who creates light in the darkness,
healing out of woundedness,
wholeness out of brokenness
and life out of death – in the world.

It is this world-entering, world-loving God
who now moves through the Holy Spirit in the church, through the church,
and even still – as always – beyond the church.

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Trinity Sunday – and the day before Memorial Day.
And this will be a Memorial Day
which looks not only to the past and to those who have died,
but which looks across the seas and finds American soldiers,
and the soldiers other nations, fighting and dying in conflicts.

And the church looks on.

More than that, the church participates. Many of the soldiers who will fight today –
in Afghanistan, and wherever else they fight that we don't know about –
many of these soldiers are baptized members of the body of Christ.

(Just this week I received an email from a friend in the Army Reserve

who is stationed somewhere in or around Afghanistan)

In the earliest days of the church,

soldiers of the Roman empire who were converted to Christianity
were required to renounce their allegiance to the empire in order to be baptized.

(Baptism came to be called a “sacrament”

because the vows were similar to the soldiers “sacramentum”,
or oath of allegiance.)

Then came the Emperor Constantine, who in one fell swoop

declared his whole kingdom to be Christian
and ordered all to be baptized, citizen and soldier alike.

His decree changed things dramatically,
giving us a world in which many Christians are soldiers.

One of the biggest questions of Christian history is to discern,

how – if at all – God has chosen to work through what Constantine did,
and how – if at all – God may still be working in and through
what Constantine has wrought.

However we answer, the reality remains that

Christian soldiers have participated in the work of the nation for centuries,
hoping and praying that even in the horror of violent conflict,
evil might be overcome and God’s just and peaceful purposes achieved.

At the same time – on the other hand – as Trinitarians,

As those who know God through

we must acknowledge that Jesus was one who chose a non-violent path to follow,

who ordered his disciples to lay down their swords in the garden of Gethsemane,
even in the face of a great injustice,

because the justice that God could accomplish through Jesus

on the cross and on the bright morning of Easter

was infinitely greater than the justice his disciples could ever achieve

by their own means.

The results of war can never be clear-cut. War is never purely just. War is never holy.

There is no simple victory in war,

even if what we wrongly call “our side” wins without a single casualty.

H. Richard Niebuhr, one of the great American Christian minds of the 20th century,

once wrote a letter to his brother Reinhold,

just as America was being drawn into war against Hitler,

in which he likened war to Crucifixion.

War is God’s judgment on us all – on whatever side we fight.

So these “two hands” continue to have their discussion – often a heated discussion –
in the church.

Some believers will follow the Triune God into armed battle for the sake of justice –
even if reluctantly.

Other believers will follow the Triune God by participating in the nations
through an active resistance of any kind of violent means.

Both actions can be faithful, in their deep desire to honor the Triune God.

Just as both actions can be corrupted by sin.

Let our National Memorial Day be a time to remember –

with both appreciation and anguish –

those who have given their lives

in the active pursuit of the perfect will of our Holy God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.