

July 3, 2005
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 12:22-34
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“First Things First”

On Friday at the Benjamin Harrison Home 60 people from around the world gathered to be sworn in as new citizens of the United States. From ages 18 to 73, they came from 25 countries including India, China, Nigeria, El Salvador, Romania, Vietnam and Canada. They are students, factory workers, nurses and engineers. They came to assume the responsibilities of citizenship that we who have been born here often take for granted. As we celebrate the birthday of our country, such scenes have particular poignancy. It is easy to forget how much we have been given as a people through the sacrifice of others and how much we have that we have received as individuals that we did not make, build or create ourselves.

We are not the first people to be struck with spiritual amnesia. After the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, they occupied houses, harvested the vineyards and planted the fields that had been established by others. Over the centuries, as the people cleared new fields, planted new vineyards and built new homes, it was easy to forget that all that they had was a gift from God. They did not create the earth with its fertile soil or control the weather or choose the culture into which they were born.

In order that the people not forget what God had done for them, Moses instructed the people to offer the first fruits of the land as an offering to God. As they offered their gifts, they told the ancient story of how God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and go to a new land. The community remembered how their ancestors were wanderers upon the face of the earth. God sent them into Egypt to live through a time of famine. They remembered how a Pharaoh arose who did not remember their ancestor Joseph and how this Pharaoh made them into slaves. Then they told how God delivered them from bondage, brought them safely through the Red Sea, kept them alive in the wilderness and gave them this good land to be their home. As they told this ancient story, it was as if they too had been there. This ancient story coursed through their blood and sounded in their hearts. It was as if, they too, generations later, could feel the whip of their oppressor and taste the bitter bead of slavery. The ancient story became their story. Their historical and spiritual amnesia left them and they gave thanks to the Lord. These words functioned like Israel's creed for they captured the essential story of the faith. These words led the people to get their priorities straight, to put first things first.

Once, Jesus was teaching a large crowd of people. Someone in the crowd was arguing with his brother about their inheritance. Jesus knew their hearts and minds were not concerned with the most important things. They had not put first things first. So Jesus said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” Then he invited them to look at the world from God's point of view. He wanted them to see

the splendor of creation and to see the way in which God cares for all things. He told them not to be anxious over secondary matters or things they could not control. He even suggested that all the energy that goes into worry is wasted for it does not change the outcome or improve the situation. He wanted them to focus on what matters most—to put first things first. Therefore, Jesus said, “Seek God’s kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.” You may think it was easy for Jesus to say these things or that the times were not so difficult then. We forget that he spoke these words during a time of brutal occupation, when hunger and death were everyday realities. Even in the most difficult times, he calls us to put first things first.

It would be an act of insensitivity or even cruelty, if you or I were to say to someone in real crisis, “Don’t worry because everything is going to be alright.” We would be like Job’s comforters. We do not know that another person’s pain is going to ease, a loved one will not die, a financial crisis will be averted or a desperately needed new job found. We do not know who may be struggling with clinical anxiety. We don’t know these things. When we say, “don’t worry” to a friend in distress the words may ring the “tin ring” of cheap grace. We are not the ones who say, “Don’t worry.” Jesus is. Jesus calls us from fruitless anxiety because he sees the world from the point of view of his heavenly Father. He does not say there is no struggle, pain, disappointment, betrayal or even untimely death. He experienced all of these things. He knew that no matter what happens to us in this life, God love us and cares for us. God wants us to set our hearts and minds on building up treasure in heaven. We build up treasure in heaven by how we live on earth by loving others. Anxiety is so deadly because it keeps us from seeing God care for all of creation and for each one of us.

As a nation and as individuals we are an anxious people. We worry about a war that seems to have no end, the balance between homeland security and the erosion of civil liberties, having enough to provide food, education and health care for our children and ourselves, the loss of moral values and the lack of compassion in our society, and random violence in our schools and cities. In these words of Jesus, God calls us from anxiety to faith. Moving from anxiety to faith is the first step in getting our priorities straight. The more anxious we become, the more likely we are to do things or promote policies that destroy the very things we seek. Let me give you a small example. A church sponsored a refugee from the Sudan. Yet, because of the homeland security regulations and immigration laws, he was not eligible to get a driver’s license. Without a driver’s license, it was very difficult if not impossible for him to keep his job as a custodian in a school. When we discover a faith in the providence of God that is deeper and stronger than our anxiety about particular situations, then we can make better decisions and take positive actions in difficult times. Faith frees us to look at the world from God’s perspective.

Jesus not only calls us from anxiety to faith, he also calls us from arrogance to gratitude. Like the Israelites, we too are tempted to forget that everything we have is a gift of God. We may think we have earned our possessions by the sweat of our brow and by our nimble wit, but we always stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. The illusion of the self-made person is one of the most dangerous illusions

around. God has given us the families into which we were born, the communities in which we live, the economic, political and social system of our nation, and the earth as our home. When we realize that life is a gift, we are moved to consider the ravens of the air and the lilies of the field and be grateful.

On this Fourth of July weekend, we are also grateful as a people. This amazing nation is our home and our heritage. It was here before us and we pray it will be here long after we are gone. We are stewards of this land, its culture and its political institutions. There is no room for national arrogance, only gratitude. Gratitude leads us to be good stewards of our freedoms and our natural resources, to take our responsibilities for the well being of the whole community seriously, to live compassionate, just and moral lives.

Over 50 years ago the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote *The Irony of American History* at a time when our nation was engaged in the global struggle against communism. To Niebuhr, the ironic character of our history means that as a people we are never as good as we pretend to be nor are our purposes as holy as we claim them to be. As a nation we are at our best when we are able to hold fast to our highest ideals while recognizing that our actions far fall short of our noble goals. When we refuse to recognize our own failures, moral blindness and shortcomings, we open ourselves to tragic consequences. The wise person or nation is the one that strives for what is good in the sight of all while at the same time remaining humble before God and aware of our own imperfections.

The conclusion of Niebuhr's analysis of American history is as true today as when it was written. In our global conflicts, Niebuhr said that we need "a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us... a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities...[and] a sense of gratitude for the divine mercies which are promised to those who humble themselves." Niebuhr says that the insights of faith are required if we are to save our civilization. "For if we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory." (p. 174) Arrogance and smug self-satisfaction lead us to hatred and vainglory, but gratitude leads us to faith, hope and love.

Finally, Jesus calls us from greed to generosity. When faith is the foundation of our lives and gratitude wells up in our hearts, then we are free to give. A spirit of thanksgiving leads to a harvest of generosity. Jesus says that the faithful are those who do not need to hoard their material goods or worry incessantly about food, clothing and the material things of life. The faithful are free to give away the best things in life and to share their goods with others. A secure person is a compassionate and generous person. A secure nation is a nation that practices justice and mercy.

Some years ago, Faith Fuller spoke at the dedication of a Habitat of Humanity house built by the congregation I served. Faith Fuller is the daughter of Millard Fuller the founder of Habitat. She spoke quite candidly about her family. Early in life, her father made a great deal of money in business. While he was a financial success, his marriage and his spiritual life were falling apart. Separated from his wife, the time had come to face his current fears and former dreams. He decided that the money he had made, which had always seemed so important to him, was part of the problem. He decided to give it all away. He and his wife decided to make a new start together. Only this time, they had a new purpose. He had seen how dramatically home ownership had changed the life of a poor family. With a fresh vision and the support of others, he began Habitat for Humanity, which has become one of the largest home building organizations in the world. Faith led him to move from greed to generosity.

Jesus calls us to put first things first. On this Fourth of July weekend, it is easy to forget what the fireworks and food are all about. When we know that all of life is God's good gift, then we are free to move from anxiety to faith, from arrogance to gratitude and from greed to generosity. May our lives be an offering of thanksgiving to this God of grace.