

Yesterday the most powerful nation in the history of the world celebrated 239 years of Independence.

But as Spiderman said, "With great power comes great responsibility." Or as Jesus originally said it, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return."<sup>1</sup>

So how do we act responsibly with the great gifts and powers we have? What does Jesus expect of us?

Well, as we come to church this Independence Day weekend, we hear a very challenging statement from Jesus. It's part of the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."<sup>2</sup>

Love your enemies. Very challenging. Easy to understand. Hard to do. Is it even possible to do? Can we truly love our enemies?

Well I think I know what some of you are thinking...

Jim. Get real. Loving your enemy, that's a nice pious statement. But we live in the real world. And there are some evil people out there. In your religious fantasy land maybe it's possible to love your enemy. But we live in a world with ISIS. We live in a world with racist church shootings in Charleston. Love those kinds of people? No way. We have to be realistic.

If that's what you're thinking, I want to assure you that I share the same difficulties you do. I too live in this real world.

And I'm no pacifist. I firmly believe that there are times when force is necessary. In the world we live in today, we have a responsibility at certain times to use force to protect the weak and stop aggressors.

In fact, I look to what is known as "Just War" doctrine first promulgated 1,600 years ago by the great St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine asserted that war should never be the first option. But he also said that it's not always the worst option. Sometimes wars are the lesser of two evils, and force is sometimes needed to protect the weak from the wicked.

St. Augustine very much lived in the real world.

But in his second most famous work, *The City of God*, he pushed Christians to think in ways that extend beyond this real world we all live in.

Augustine made the distinction between the Earthly City and the Heavenly City. The Earthly City, or the Earthly Nation is sometimes nicknamed the "City of Man." And the Earthly

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:48

<sup>2</sup> Matt 5:43-44

City, the Human City, any human nation is always temporary. But God's heavenly realm, God's heavenly kingdom, the City of God is eternal.

And as Christians, we carry dual citizenship.

Most of us in the room are citizens of that Earthly City, that nation known as the United States of America. And we can be proud of that citizenship. We can celebrate this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend our blessings of liberty and independence.

But as Christians we always carry dual citizenship. We have dual allegiances. And in fact, we owe a higher allegiance to God's eternal kingdom than we do to any earthly nation or empire or kingdom. God's kingdom comes even before the United States of America.

Even the best of our earthly nations are temporary. God's kingdom, the City of God, is eternal. And as we are reminded in Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," which quotes from Revelation, "The kingdom of this world; is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever."<sup>3</sup>

So when we hear the Sermon on the Mount, when we hear Jesus telling us to love our enemies, what we are encountering is Jesus coming to us in the real world, in the face of real evil, in the midst of real struggles. And yet Jesus is challenging us to begin to live more and more as citizens of his eternal kingdom.

What Jesus is telling us is often on a collision course with the way we usually operate, with the way we usually think. And yet he is asking us to grow to be more like him, and to begin to operate less as citizens of any earthly nation, and to live more and more into our identity as Christians, as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

And I guarantee you this is not easy.

"Love your enemy." How do you do that? I would offer two thoughts.

First of all, loving people who have done wrong does not mean exempting them from justice. The law at its best protects the innocent and punishes the guilty, and it should be used. Loving someone does not mean giving them a magical "get out of jail free" card.

And yes, sometimes people are able to offer forgiveness to those who wronged them. In Charleston, the families of the victims were able to offer forgiveness to the alleged shooter. That's a remarkable thing to do. It speaks to the depths of their level of faith.

But that doesn't exempt the shooter from facing the criminal charges for his actions. Yes, Jesus asks us to love our enemies. But that doesn't exempt them from facing the consequences of their actions.

But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the second part of Jesus statement.

---

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 11:15

"Love your enemies... and pray for those who persecute you."

Pray for your enemies. Sometimes, it's easier to do this second thing, to pray for our enemies, before we grow able to do the first thing, to love our enemies.

Sometimes the best way to start to love someone who has wronged you is to pray for them, to ask God to turn their hearts, to ask God to forgive them. Even before we are able to forgive our enemies ourselves, we can ask God to forgive them. That can be an important first step.

In praying for enemies, we resist the trap of caricaturing them, of making things too simplistic. How do I understand the twistedness of a group like ISIS? I can't. But I can ask God to enlighten them, to break through and show them the evil of their ways. And that's often the best first step we can make.

And maybe, just maybe, we can begin to learn how we might be able to love them. It's certainly not easy. But it's what God would have us do.

Which brings us back to July 4<sup>th</sup>. There are times that America has fallen short in our history. We have done some dark things in the past.

But we have also had shining moments when we have been able to live more fully into our ideals, and when we have lived more as citizens of the City of God than the City of Man.

And one of my favorite instances is in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Nazi Germany was certainly one of the most evil regimes in the history of the world. And going to war against them to stop their destructiveness was certainly appropriate. But in the years after WWII, we as a nation did a remarkable thing.

During the war, General George C. Marshall was the army Chief of Staff. He was pivotal in defeating Nazism. Winston Churchill called him "THE Organizer of (the Allied) Victory."

But after Hitler was defeated, Marshall led the United States in a different way. As Secretary of State after the war, he used his considerable influence to push our country into aiding and rebuilding our fallen enemies.

The Marshall Plan is perhaps the greatest example in the history of the world of one nation reaching out and helping its defeated foe. And eventually, Marshall who was instrumental in winning the war, would also win the Nobel Peace Prize.

When we're at our best, we get glimpses, like the Marshall Plan, of what it means to live more fully as citizens not only of the United States but also as citizens of the City of God.

Which brings me to where our ultimate hope lies. We live in the messiness of this world, the messiness of the City of Man.

But we also look forward to the time when God will make all things right, when God will break down the walls that divide us, when God will remove the divisions caused by our own sin and evil. At God's table, all will be able to find a place together.

There's a wonderful scene at the end of the 1984 movie, *Places in the Heart*. The movie is set in depression era Texas. Early on, the beloved sheriff is accidentally shot by a drunken black teenager. The boy is then lynched. The bank tries to foreclose on the sheriff's widow. She hires a black man to serve as her farmhand to try to bring the harvest in. That man is eventually run out of town by the KKK.

And yet, in the last remarkable scene, there is a communion service at their little Baptist church. There are just a few folks gathered there when communion begins. But as they pass the trays to each other, you see more and more people in the pews.

And the bank president is sharing communion with the widow he tried to foreclose on. And you see the men who lynched the black boy, passing communion to widow's black farm hand, who passes it to the Klansmen.

And finally, you realize this is no ordinary, earthly communion service. For the dead sheriff is sitting there in a pew next to boy who had killed him and who had then been lynched himself. "The peace of Christ," the sheriff says to the boy as he passes him communion. "The peace of Christ," the boy replies.

One writer says this about the scene:

"Here, at the Lord's Table, life triumphs over death, love overcomes hatred, mercy overcomes guilt, and those who could not or would not live together in peace are reconciled in Christ's name. It is not reality, but a vision—yet it is a vision more real than any earthly truth. It is a vision of the coming reign of God."<sup>4</sup>

A vision more real than any earthly truth. That's what it means to be part of the City of God—to trust that the reality of that vision is greater than any reality we can experience here on earth.

As we live as citizens in this land of freedom, let us look forward to the even greater freedom that can come as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Let freedom ring.  
Let freedom REIGN.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kimberly Long, *The Worshipping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*