

Christians and Citizens

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The Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Holy Communion
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1 Samuel 8:1-22; Mark 12:13-17

“And the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.'” --
1 Samuel 8:7

I suspect that a fair number of us were watching fireworks last night, either live or on TV. And we may have had some sort of celebration earlier in the day – a cookout or a parade or some other event – to commemorate our country's 233rd year. And I hope that whatever you did, it made you proud to be an American.

I drove to Grand Rapids and back. That made me proud to be an American. That may sound a bit odd, but the fact of the matter is that I rarely feel more proud to be an American than when I'm driving on the interstate. In less than six hours last Friday, I passed through or around five major cities, hundreds of small towns and villages, tens of thousands of acres of some of the richest farmland in the world, and more trees, rivers, streams, and lakes than I could keep track of.

And I was doing so on one of the safest and most efficient motorways ever designed, the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System, which also happens to be the largest thing ever built by human beings. Having traveled on the roads of other countries, I never cease to marvel at the network of highways that allows us to get from one place to another in our vast country easily, safely, and inexpensively. I'm grateful and proud of the foresight, the commitment, the planning, and the immense expenditure of labor and money that brought our national highway system into reality, and what that system allows us to do. Some people get patriotic at a parade; I get patriotic on the freeway.

And last week the freeway took us to and from that UCC mega-church called General Synod where, every two years, we in this denomination gather to learn, to worship, to debate, to decide, and above all, to celebrate. We celebrate our unity and our diversity, our rich heritage and our growing edge, the things we're good at and the things we're still trying to master.

At Grand Rapids this year we learned about narrative budgets, the new praise song book, “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” the political party of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the world-wide shortage of drinking water, and how to use the Internet to enhance our church's mission. And that was just the beginning.

We heard about God's punctuation, John Thomas' hairdo, and the life and ministry of the Rev. Joseph Evans, our first African American General Minister and President, elected president of our denomination more than thirty years before an African American would be elected president of our nation.

We sang “Down by the Riverside,” “Immortal, Invisible,” and at the conclusion of our Sunday afternoon worship, the great Mexican folksong celebrating the beauty of

God's creation, "De colores." The orchestra of Cathedral of Hope UCC in Dallas accompanied 3,500 worshipers singing joyfully as colorful streamers led us from our work at worship to our work in the world. We were probably making a mess of the Spanish words, but we were having a wonderful time. It was liturgy at its best.

The church was at its best in Grand Rapids, as I expected it to be, and as I drove home from a great gathering of Christians across the landscape of a great nation, I thought a lot about what it means to be a Christian in the United Church of Christ and a citizen in the United States of America, and how proud I am to be both.

I thought of the texts for this morning's sermon – rendering unto Caesar and rendering unto God from Mark's gospel, and Israel's rejection of a divine leader in favor of a human one in 2 Samuel – as I drove home through farmland, countryside, and metropolitan areas – those rocks and rills and templed hills we sang of a few minutes ago – and I realized that I'll happily continue to pay my taxes to our American Caesar to keep the roads in good shape that allow me to get to and from the national gathering of my church. I don't pay those taxes grudgingly; I pay them happily.

I'll happily pay my taxes to keep our public libraries providing free services for people looking for work in hard economic times.

I'll happily pay my taxes to support U. N. peacekeeping troops, the United States Agency for International Development, and UNICEF. I am proud to be a citizen whose tax dollars help bring relief to the suffering, justice to the oppressed, and protection to the vulnerable.

I'm less proud of my tax dollars being used to maintain secret prisons. I'm less proud of my tax dollars being used to increase, rather than decrease, the rising tide of weapons around the world. I'm less proud of my tax dollars supporting trade policies that favor economic giants like China and do little to help struggling economies in places like Honduras and El Salvador. I'm less proud of a government that gives the state of Israel millions more in military aid than it gives the Palestinian people in humanitarian aid.

Should I, therefore, withhold some of my tax dollars in protest? Once upon a time, I did just that. Every month for several years I enclosed a note with my phone bill saying that I was withholding the military tax that was then helping to fund a civil war in El Salvador that claimed thousands of innocent lives. Should I be doing the same today? Should I be refusing to render unto Caesar that little bit of tax that helps render our suspected enemies into secret rendition centers where they can be imprisoned indefinitely, beyond every recognized form of law or due process?

I am not proud to be an American when my government markets fear as public policy and justifies criminal behavior in the name of national security. We've been told and many of us still believe that our security depends on fighting them over there so that we don't have to fight them over here, and that whatever it takes to keep the war in their country is what we'll do.

I beg to differ. Our security depends not on stepping outside the law, bending the law, breaking the law, or re-writing the law. Our security depends on honoring the law, written not by committees working behind closed doors, but by God's Holy Spirit working in our human hearts.

"Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." That was God telling the prophet Samuel that the Israelites were making a big mistake in demanding a king for themselves as their neighbors had. God had been Israel's leader from the very beginning of Israel's existence as a people. In fact, it was God who brought Israel into existence, uniting disparate groups of people under the banner of individual righteousness, social justice, and peace for all people.

"I will bless you," God said to Abraham, ". . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." That was Israel's birth announcement, and Israel never had a reason to exist except to be God's people. Not the king's subjects, as the people wanted in our first reading, but to be God's people, chosen, as the prophet Isaiah said, "to be a light to the nations."

John Winthrop, one of the early governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, said the same thing to a group of Puritan colonists about to disembark from the *Arbella* in 1630:

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

The eyes of the world remain upon us more than 350 after Winthrop preached that sermon. The world watches to see how this nation that calls itself Christian will live out its values and its ideals. The world watches to see whether America will embrace or whether it will impose; whether it will cooperate or whether it will bully; whether it will share or whether it will hoard; whether it will lead or whether it will intimidate; whether it will rise above its injuries – inflicted and self-inflicted – or whether it will wallow in angry self-pity.

To ask such questions about America is to ask not only as a citizen but also and perhaps more so as a Christian. Our duty as citizens is to be the best citizens we can be – that's what we are to render unto Caesar – and it is our Christian faith that helps us do that. It is our Christian faith that will help us, if we will let it, become a light to the nations prophesied by Isaiah so many centuries ago. There is no contradiction between being a Christian and a citizen; as St. Augustine said in the fifth century, all of us here on earth are citizens of two cities, the heavenly city and the earthly city and it is the former that shapes our relationship with the latter. And it is the former, and not the latter, that is our ultimate home and destination. And our best efforts to maintain a steady course toward that heavenly city is what we are to render unto God.

May God bless us and may God bless America.