

“Strictly On, or Off, the Record?”

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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My message this morning is about the relation between our faith and public conduct. This morning we have publicly presented two children for Christian baptism and, in a few moments, present seven persons who will publicly unite in membership with this church. Christians have performed these public presentations of faith for over 2,000 years, at times at the risk of persecution and death. Even today, in some parts of the world, these persecutions persist for those who take the name of Christ.

In this country, we take particular pride that freedom of religious expression is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution of these United States: specifically in the First Amendment, which says, in part, *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....”* This liberty was directly enshrined to protect the new republic from the establishment of the state church so prevalent in European nations. Those military whom we remember in prayer today as having given the ultimate sacrifice – death – did so, in part, for the preservation of this liberty.

The challenge for us today is whether we truly understand that faith is a public matter; that the very thing for which these men and women died is only preserved if we exercise it; that persons of faith have an obligation to speak and act in the public square; and that we have to decide whether our faith is *“Strictly On, or Off, the Record.”*

Let us start with Nicodemus, a prominent clergyman, and his night encounter with Jesus. This meeting is strictly off the

record (although Jesus remembered to share it and John subsequently included it in his Gospel). Both Nicodemus and Jesus are teachers of faith. Jesus is the teacher without credentials. He's a nobody in the local ministerial association and a pain in the neck with the local clergy. Just this week he overturned the tables during the big capital fund-raising shindig at the temple. Nicodemus, on the other hand, is the big-shot teacher. He writes a column for the paper, does a radio spot and is invited to pray at lots of civic occasions. But he wants a private chat with this upstart Jesus and doesn't want anyone to see him with Jesus.

I think we are sometimes like Nicodemus, conflicted about private and public faith. We like public faith when it makes our religion and church look good. And we avoid public faith when it puts us on the hot seat.

Some of us, both by etiquette and political position, believe the maxim, "*Don't mix religion and politics.*" We assume that public conversation on matters of faith is taboo. We remember Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury, CT Baptists of January 1, 1802, which interpreted the First Amendment as "*thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.*" Jefferson's letter was a **reply** to the Danbury Baptists letter of October 7, 1801. The Baptists letter expressed concern that although the U.S. Constitution protected their religious liberties, the Connecticut state constitution did not. Some of you will remember, as I do, a game we played in elementary school both pronouncing and spelling what was then the longest word in the English language: "antidisestablishmentarianism." None of us knew what it meant, but Connecticut residents should. Because what the Danbury Baptists were objecting to was the legal establishment of the Congregational Church as the Connecticut State Church. The advocates to eliminate state churches were

“disestablishmentarians.” If you liked state churches you were an “antidisestablishmentarian.” The disestablishmentarians won: in 1820, fully 30 years after the Bill of Rights declared that the federal government should not establish a state church, the state church of Connecticut, the Congregational Church, was disestablished.

Still, many of us like to see our church and pastor recognized in the community. We like public faith when it makes our religion and church look good. Few of us will look askance today or tomorrow when we remember our war dead in prayer, even when that prayer is in the public square. Moreover, the American experience is interwoven with religious experience. Alexis de Tocqueville was a French diplomat, political scientist and historian who studied America in the 1830’s and published his observations in his 1835 book Democracy in America. It offers profound analyses of the roles of religion, morality and voluntary action. He praised our voluntary associations, including churches, in a favorable light compared to the established churches of the Old World. (He has been misquoted by both Democrat and Republican leaders as saying “America is great because America is good, and when America ceases to be good it will cease to be great.” Though poetic and in keeping with his spirit, he never wrote it.)

To further the point of the interrelations between religion and our nation, one need look no further than Memorial Day. Memorial Day originated with the honoring of American Civil War dead. In both the North and defeated Confederacy, the dead of victors and vanquished were remembered and honored by both sides in isolated memorials until a national day was proclaimed in 1868.

That spirit of charity toward enemies, enemies against which arms were taken up, is carved into the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In the center of the massive marble

memorial to the 16th President is Abraham Lincoln, high and imposing in statuary as he was in life. On the walls beside him are two of his most famous speeches: The Gettysburg Address (1863) and his Second Inaugural Address (1865). The latter, given just before the end of the American Civil War, is most remembered for its closing statement of mercy for the soon-to-be defeated Southern States:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

But we may have forgotten that Lincoln understood that war as a consequence of God’s judgment upon “America’s original sin:” the institution of slavery and upon the nation that allowed it. Immediately before his gracious conclusion he said:

“Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” (Biblical quote from Psalm 19:9)

Religion and faith are indeed public matters, and Christian faith all the more so. In addition to today’s public professions of faith, we received confirmands two weeks ago and ten new members six weeks before that.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be “born again,” and we sometimes make that a metaphor only for personal faith. But Nicodemus’ public role and his decision to approach Jesus

in private shows that Jesus challenged how Nicodemus lived his faith both privately and publicly.

The application of such faith varies from place to place. For us, living in a democracy, it means being participants: in the voting booth, in town meetings, in civic government, and in organizations that promote the common good and – using Lincoln’s words – “the right, as God gives us to see the right.”

Faith, therefore, is public and requires public participation. Few of us choose our nation. Most are born into it, although a few by immigration and naturalization do make a conscious choice. In either case, if you are in this nation you are a citizen of a republic; more specifically, a representative democracy in which we elect those who lead. American Methodism, first organized only three years before the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, was born at the same time and embodies this in our decision-making structures. In church, except for Church Conference when all may vote to elect leaders, we are a representative democracy.

No form of government is perfect. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said, “Democracy is the worst form of government ever invented – except for all the others.” Faith in action – whether as spoken by Jesus, de Tocqueville or Lincoln – is an important element in the exercise of democracy. Paul Berman wrote an article ([New York Times Magazine, May 11, 1997, p. 37](#)) on the late Vaclav Havel, dissident against Soviet control of Czechoslovakia, its last president and first president of the Czech Republic. Berman observed “*democracy requires a certain kind of citizen. It requires citizens who feel responsible for something more than their own well-feathered little corner; citizens who want to participate in society’s affairs, who insist on it; citizens with backbones; citizens who hold their ideas about democracy at the deepest level, at the level that religion is held, where beliefs and identity are the same.*”

This is why we sometimes avoid public faith, and why we so respect the sacrifice of our war dead. Well we know that there is a self-serving interest in us all, and we tend to avoid public faith when it puts us on the hot seat. We are not so sure when it asks some sacrifice of us; when it speaks for the voiceless whose complaints we might rather not hear; and when it challenges our preferred way of doing things.

And it makes us uncomfortable when those whom we love and respect, particularly in the church, disagree with us on matters of public policy. In those conversations I have long found guidance in the words of Evelyn Beatrice Hall in her 1906 biography of the 18th century philosopher Voltaire. Hall expressed the spirit of the philosopher in this way, *“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”*

So, on this Trinity Sunday I remind us to honor the God whose presence is expressed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and whose sovereignty is above all earthly loyalty and realms, including that of these United States. On this Peace with Justice Sunday I invite us to recommit to following the Prince of Peace. And on this Memorial Sunday I exhort us to be “On the Record”: with our faith, with our values and with our actions. In so doing we affirm both John 3:16 AND John 3:17: “that whoever believes in Jesus shall have eternal life” (John 3:16) AND that the world might not be condemned, but saved, by him. (John 3:17). Amen.