

“God & Country”

II Samuel 5

Gordon Wiersma 7/5/09

I was on vacation last Sunday – perhaps some of you noticed! – although maybe some of you were gone too – and lots of people are on vacation today – this holiday weekend – Rev. Russell and her family included; but even though I was on vacation, I was still able to read Jill’s sermon this past week – and one of the directions she delved into that resonated with me was the need for a church, for this congregation, to be a place where it is safe for us to speak the truth of our lives – and to do so in the context of God’s grace – that kind of community provides healing and strength for all of us. And I was thinking that part of what that means is to be able to talk in church about things that are difficult – about issues that we may have differences about; we would want to expect that church is a place where we can be honest not in a way that demands uniformity, but in a way that believes we can delve into the complexities of life with faithfulness and respect and integrity – and even if we do not find unanimity, what we will receive is some understanding, and a common desire for our faith in God to be a guide and blessing to us and through us.

So – difficult issues...how about if we talk about God and country – about God and the United States of America – about being a Christian and being a citizen...how does that fit into our faith, our commitments and loyalties, our heart and soul? My assumption is that you do hear that as a difficult issue – that you have encountered a wide range of differing ideas about that relationship of God and country - opinions sometimes expressed with strong emotions; and I assume that you have a sense there may be different ideas about such things among us here – right? How about the American flag being in the sanctuary or not, as an issue connected to God and country? The American flag is not in the sanctuary here at Hope Church - at some churches it is; this Sunday on the 4th of July weekend we do display the American flag in the narthex, and you’ll find a note about that in the bulletin. I know there are people here at Hope

Church who would like to always have the American flag in the sanctuary – as a sign of respect to and gratitude for our country – and having the flag in the narthex only twice a year perhaps seems like a hollow gesture; there are others at Hope Church who think the American flag has no place at all, not even occasionally in the narthex – because they believe church is a place only for devotion to God. So – is there one group here that loves country and one that hates country? One that loves God and the other that doesn't? Of course not – we are good Christians and citizens who have differences - and there are strong currents of history and experience that run through each person's perspective.

That's important and good, I think, to acknowledge the differences among us, even as we live out a certain practice – important to understand there is some tension and feeling there for us to consider and respect. But then, do we just live with our differences? Well, partly – accepting that there need not be uniformity and unanimity can itself be a healing spirit that points to deeper truths shared among us. But I think differences aren't meant only to be accepted – they are also to be listened to, to see if there are in them common things we can wrestle with, understand, encounter.

Wondering about the American flag does bring up the issues of God and country, of faith and citizenship – and in order to listen to our differences about such things, it can help to see how other people deal with such things as well – and that's where the stories of King David come in.

If you are looking for an example of God and country being closely linked, you have it with God and Israel; if you are looking for an example of God and a national leader being closely linked – you have it with God and David. You can find those dynamics in many places in the stories told in the books of Samuel, but right there in the few verses we heard today, it is all summed up so neatly. The uniting of Judah and Israel into the one nation of Israel with David as its king is a big moment, and this political achievement is done with the clear seal of God's approval – we are told that the people and king make a covenant together “before the LORD” – this is a nation

approved by God. And that seal of approval is closely linked to the affirmation of David as the King – first it is the nation of Israel that is linked to the LORD, but then it is King David himself, on his own, who is given that distinction – the chosen one of God...we are told that David becomes greater because the LORD is with him – God particularly, specifically with David – God and David.

And it seems like for one beautiful moment in history it is a good thing, this intensely close link of God and country, of God and leader, of religion and politics. This nation of Israel has come through a long struggle as a collection of tribes into a cohesive national unit – and it has been the core calling of God that has brought them together to live faithfully. For David it has been his own long journey – one that came not from privilege, but from humble beginnings and was sustained by devotion to God – he is anointed to lead as one faithful to God and blessed by God. I wonder if, regardless of all of the questions we have about the politics and practices of that time that we see in the stories of Israel and David – I wonder if we can see the good and value of that picture of nation and leader...a nation formed in the identity of relationship with and faithfulness to God; a leader with gifts called out by God's Spirit and pointing to the power and presence of God in his anointing. I think it is necessary to see the good that can happen through that – that life can be blessed when a people and a leader are formed by God's call and live out God's ways. That's the picture we can see – that was the plan to be carried out – God and country and leader – together.

But it seems as though that picture and that potential lasts for only a moment – that there is just this brief space in which the goodness of this union of God and country and leader can be held together in a fruitful way – because it soon falters, and will fall apart. Of course David's reign lasts for more than just a moment – it is a good long reign of 40 years – but the link of God and country and ruler seems doomed from the start. What happens for the nation of Israel is that they are not able to keep a distinction between God's blessing and presence for them and their own self-importance – what is meant to be viewed with gratitude instead becomes viewed with arrogance; and soon

their worship of God becomes more of a national religion that promotes and perpetuates itself – a worship of the God of *Israel* instead of worship of God. And for David he heads down the same path – his own sense of blessing and power soon becomes a perspective of privilege and entitlement (you can look ahead – the story of Bathsheba is coming soon...) - David cannot keep his faith in a powerful God distinct from his own love of power over others. There is this brief picture of the possibilities of God and country and leader – but the broader history of Israel is a story of those relationships falling out of kilter – and it is not a pretty picture.

Why is that – what is that about? I think part of the dilemma is that as soon as God and country, God and leader, are linked, it becomes an easy step to replace one with the other – the country becomes God-like to you; the leader becomes God-like to you – or the country or leader becomes God to itself. But perhaps that is putting it too obviously – because I think the more subtle thing that happens is that just by even putting God and country and leader side by side, something insidious happens...a truth about the relationship is lost: which is that God is always above; God's truth by its nature is always going to be critiquing, correcting, in tension with any human expression of it. Now that does that nullify the potential there is for God's goodness and blessing to be present for country and leader – but as soon as it is too close, something essential about the relationship is lost. The nature of God and of a country and leader is that God will always be in judgment of them – now we hear judgment often as condemnation, but that is not what I mean – judgment is simply the truth that the wholeness of God's ways will always be distinct from and a challenge to the ways of any people at any time in history.

Compared to the setting of Israel and David, we have vast differences today in our culture and national setting and politics and leadership – but the challenges, the opportunities and tensions we face are remarkably similar: part of what we can witness to is the blessing it is for a country, a people, a nation to live out God's call to faithfulness – following the 10 commandments, listening to the prophets call for justice,

acknowledging God's goodness – it's a pretty good way to live; and we can love and support our country as we see the ways it can be a blessing to us and others. But in order to be truly faithful we need to at the same time always hear the voice of God calling our nation and leaders to humility, to repentance – the voice of God's judgment that is always above the place and policy of any people. Although we can always strive not to separate God from the soul of this nation, we must also strive never to fuse God's will and blessing with the identity of this nation. The same is true for any leader – for any people – for any political structure.

And interestingly enough the same is really true for the church as well, maybe even especially for the church: we cannot just put God alongside the church; and leaders cannot make themselves synonymous with God's word – when we do that, things quickly become about our own status and privilege rather than about gratitude and faithfulness. God is always in judgment of the church in its time – the voice of God always critiquing and correcting and guiding – and yet that is God's love and grace for us. We are connected to God, but we are never in charge of God!

Our Psalm today, Psalm 48, expresses both the tensions and the truth for us to listen to this day – mixed into it you see attention to country and political power – but the ultimate truth it expresses is that the message to hear is not about Israel, or David – it is not about the USA or Obama or any nation or leader – or you or me; it is about peoples and nations and leaders and us being guided by God – the greatness and goodness and truth of God. In this nation we love and with our leaders that we follow, in this church we gather in – it is the God of all the earth that we worship; as citizens in this place, it is Jesus Christ who loves the whole world that we serve.

AMEN.