

Is the American Dream, God's Dream? Readings: Lev. 19:1-2;9-18; Mt. 5:38-48 E7/A
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 2-19-17

I don't know about you, but I was raised in a very patriotic household. We hung the American flag on holidays, ate cherry pie on George Washington's birthday, celebrated the 4th of July, and argued politics. My father and his brothers were veterans of WWII, one of whom suffered a severe leg injury in the Battle of the Bulge. So on each Veteran's Day and Memorial Day, we either visited a cemetery or attended a parade. In school, we saluted the flag, sang "My Country Tis of Thee," and learned to march in the classroom. I am not sure why we had to march but it did give us a head-start in case we were drafted into the military.

Being a Bostonian, our history lessons focused on the Revolutionary War of Independence. For children like me, the Boston Tea Party became the most decisive event in human history as if Boston were the hub of the universe. In case you've forgotten, in 1773, a group of Massachusetts' colonists disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians and boarded 3 British tea ships. They dumped 342 chests of teas into the Boston Harbor in response to the taxation tyranny of the British Crown. This and other events led to the eventual Declaration of Independence and the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

Growing up in the United States during the 1950's, most people were more interested in pursuing the American Dream than focusing on foreign policy or global economic justice. That was the norm. The American Dream was a pursuit for happiness that often included a good job, home ownership, a comfortable marriage, and a healthy family of children. For some, it was the desire to live a better life than the previous generation, seeking after economic security and personal fulfillment. There is nothing ungodly about pursuing the American dream and it has brought happiness to many.

However, the American Dream and American Civil Religion are not the same thing as Christianity. In fact, they are often in tension with each other. American Civil Religion says:
- America is God's chosen nation. -It is more important to pledge one's allegiance to one's country than to God. -The flag is a sacred symbol of patriotism which must be honored as a sign of one's loyalty to the country. -America's wars are holy wars, blessed by God. -God, guns, and guts made America. Let's keep all three.

It is into this context of patriotic fervor, the American dream, and parochialism that we hear a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in today's gospel story. In this gospel, there are a lot of teachings that are subversive, counter-cultural, and a challenge to those of us who have committed ourselves to follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. In fact, as we hear these teachings, we begin to realize just how much God's dream for humanity differs from American Civil Religion.

The core message of today's passage is the ethic of nonviolence: "Turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, be perfect." {Mt. 5} In other words, Jesus is offering us profound wisdom on how to heal the divide between *us* and *them*; how to practice tolerance and acceptance of those who differ; and most importantly, how to grow into a Holy People whose primary focus is on unity and harmony rather than fear and separation. This is a tall order that is difficult to achieve. No wonder Christians over the centuries have developed elaborate strategies for avoiding these commands. It just doesn't seem normal or even possible to do these things.

For instance, normal says to hate your enemies. Jesus says to love them. Normal seeks revenge on those who hurt us. Jesus says to pray for them. If someone hits you, normal says "swing back." Jesus says to turn the other cheek. Normal says "get a job" to those who beg. Jesus says to give to everyone who begs and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. In other words, in Jesus' book, "normal" does not equate to God's dream for us. It seems as if Jesus is challenging his disciples to do things that are contrary to their human nature. And from a biological perspective, that is absolutely true! After all, humans are hardwired to respond to a threat by fighting or fleeing.

The spiritual question then is this: Is our future pre-determined by our biological tendency to fight or flee? Or can human beings rise to a higher level of consciousness where we can say *no* to fear and *yes* to love? I believe the latter is possible because I have a more positive view of humanity. And I think Jesus came to show us how, so that we can fully live into our divine nature as children of God.

One of the obstacles many people have with embracing God's dream, is that they see the world from their own limited perspective of "me, myself, and I." When it is all about "me," it is easier to fall into being unkind, holding grudges, striking back, staying mad, seeking revenge, and discriminating against others when our personal desires are thwarted. And so Jesus reminds us that if we want peace and harmony in our world and in our relationships, then we have to get "me, myself, and I" out of the center and put God there instead. The truth is, I am not the center of the universe. Boston is not the Hub of the Universe. And the Boston Tea Party was not the pivotal event in human history. And yet, I once thought these thoughts until I realized that this kind of limited and self-centered thinking just didn't work out for me in the long run. And the truth is, it probably doesn't work for you either.

Jesus said: "Turn the other cheek, go the second mile, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, be perfect." In 1st century Palestine, the law of retaliation was alive and well. I would submit that today, this law remains in the hearts of many: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." Sounds fair, doesn't it? However, if we continue this cycle of violence, justifying "an eye for an eye", then the whole world will eventually go blind. And that is what is happening today, especially in the Middle East where for decades we have fought fire with fire instead of quenching the fire with water. When will this craziness end? When will we realize that what we are doing is not working? Maybe we need to look at a different solution. The good news is there have been a few successful attempts to break the cycle of war and violence with non-violent resistance. Let me give a few examples:

In his striving for civil rights for African Americans, Martin Luther King Jr. led a movement based on strong but peaceful resistance, even to those who came against him with clubs. He believed: "To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough, and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate."

After the Civil War, there were many northerners who wanted to punish the southerners for their part in the War Between the States. President Lincoln said *no* to that kind of retaliation. Knowing the devastation and human costs of war, Lincoln sought reconciliation and said: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations' 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."

Mahatma Gandhi, a leading figure in India's struggle to gain independence from Great Britain, embraced a nonviolent philosophy of passive resistance. Known for his ascetic lifestyle—he often dressed only in a loincloth and shawl. Because of his tireless efforts with non-violent resistance, India eventually gained independence from British rule in 1947. I think some of the most profound quotes uttered by Gandhi, summarize today's gospel: "Whenever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love." "Non-violence is a weapon of the strong." "Anger is the enemy of non-violence and pride is a monster that swallows it up." "Peace is the most powerful weapon of mankind." "It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends but to befriend one who regards himself as your enemy is the quintessence of true religion." "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

I don't think the Sermon on the Mount is an exhaustive strategy for national security in our complex world. Nor does it instruct us what to do in every instance of aggression. Yet there is profound wisdom in this gospel on how to move forward in a world that continues to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Jesus teaches us about life in God's realm where people think about others first, where *me, myself, and I* become secondary considerations. He encourages us never to lose sight of the human face in front of us because each person carries a divine spark within. Jesus's vision of healing a world in pain begins with us blessing one another rather than blaming, living into our identity as children of God, children of the Light.

There will always be a tension between our human nature as fearful people and our divine nature as children of God. That is why it is so important to gather together each week as a community of faith, to be strengthened in grace, upheld in love, and transformed into the people God wills for us to be. And so we continue to pray: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."