

Beyond Nation, Ethnicity and Creed

Independence Day Weekend, Pentecost V

Readings from our Past: Psalm 33:10-17; Matthew 5:38-48

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

About eighteen months ago, at the turn of the millennium, I pointed to a book that had impressed me with its insight about our present human situation in terms of the international global situation. Samuel T. Huntington with a lot of experience in international affairs had written a book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, which concludes with this paragraph:

In the 1950s, Lester Pearson warned that humans were moving into an age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other's history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each other's lives. The alternative in this over crowded little world is misunderstanding, tension, clash and catastrophe. The futures of both peace and civilization depend upon understanding and cooperation among the political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders of the world's major civilizations. In the clash of civilizations, Europe and America will hang together or hang separately. In the greater clash, the global real clash between civilization and barbarism, the world's great civilizations with their rich accomplishments in religion, art, literature, philosophy, science, technology, morality and compassion, will also hang together or hang separately. In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war.

The human story is a fascinating story and, as in this week once again we celebrate the independence of our nation, I thought it might be well for us to think of our nation and our Western civilization in terms of its unique values which have come to us at great cost and great sacrifice. We have, I think, a growing awareness or raised consciousness of the sacrifice and the cost of that which we enjoy together and so easily take for granted.

Nancy and I, two or three weeks ago, went to see the film, *Pearl Harbor*, which is justifiably criticized for making a big buck on a love story and perhaps trivializing

the event itself, according to those who were there. It seems to me that is probably a justified criticism and yet, once again, that film calls to mind that Day of Infamy, and the terrible cost that has been paid even in the last century for the freedoms and the liberties that we enjoy. Perhaps the anchor of NBC, Tom Brokaw, in his book, *The Greatest Generation*, in his continuing effort to bring those voices forward, has also given us a certain new awareness of that which it has cost in the past in order to preserve and to protect that which we have as a people. And so it seems to me that it is good for us, on an occasion like this, to reflect on where we are in the world, who we are in the world, and that which is incumbent upon us in order to preserve and to perpetuate the values that have been so richly enjoyed by us as a people.

In his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*. Huntington tells the story of the past century and those great wars that were waged. There was the First World War, for example, and President Wilson committed us to that war with a suggestion that it would be a war to end all wars, and, of course, it was not, but rather it birthed Fascism and Communism and the retreat of Democracy which had been gaining ground in the century past. And then there was the Second World War and, toward its close and the close of his life, Franklin Delano Roosevelt began to speak of the United Nations and the creation of an organization of peace loving nations that would come together in the universal organization, and that would ensure a structure of permanent peace. And, of course, after the euphoria died down, we recognized before long that we were engaged in a Cold War which for decades had us teetering on the edge of disaster in a balance of terror.

I remember well the euphoria that came in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. There we thought finally we had won the battle. There was a State Department official, Francis Fukayama, who wrote a very widely discussed essay entitled, "The End of History," in which he suggested that the West had won, that the values of freedom and democracy and free enterprise and all of that which marks our life had finally been demonstrated to be superior and that it was just a matter of time before the whole world embraced those particular values and marks of Western civilization. Fukayama went so far as to suggest that the future of history would be boring.

And we know what happened to the euphoria of the fall of the Berlin Wall, for it opened up ancient wounds, the Balkans, ethnic cleansing, that terrible slaughter and massacre that went on, brought to us once again with greater clarity through the turning over of Milosevic to the world court to be tried on crimes against humanity. In the last decade plus we have seen the rise of militant fundamentalisms and religion, creating violence and horror. We have seen massacres and racial genocide, and we have recognized that the global body politic is wounded, indeed. Then President Bush had spoken of a new world order, but it was not to be, and so here we are.

Samuel Huntington suggests that it was a foolish optimism that ever believed that there could be a universal civilization, that what we are faced with and what we have to recognize is rather a diversity of civilizations, perhaps seven or eight civilizational groupings which are tied by blood and language and religion, which have a deep identity that transcends national boundaries, that represent ancient bonding of human families. It is Huntington's contention that the only way to security and to peace in this global world of ours is through the acceptance of that diversity, the recognition of it, even the celebration of it, simply to come to the realization that it will not be the West and the rest, or the West as the best, but rather, in the respective civilizational groupings, each having its own integrity, there will have to be a way of coming to understanding, of mutual respect, of the investigation of the history, the culture, the art, the philosophy, and the religious faith of the respective groups in order that there might be a living together in human community with that diversity acknowledged and recognized and celebrated.

This seems to me to make a lot of sense and the other point that he makes (apropos for us on this week in which we celebrate our independence) is that we ought to renew those values that have made us what we are, that we ought to renew and recommit ourselves to that which is uniquely Western, that which was born in Europe and has been lived out and embodied here in such a fruitful way - individual liberty, political democracy, human rights, the rule of law, that pluralism and that Christian rootage which has flowered in Western civilization. Certainly we don't want our civilization to be closed against others but, according to Huntington, there has been a naiveté about the possibility of multi-culturalism within a given civilization. Multi-culturalism within a civilization attempts to make that civilization the world, and it is not. Just as a mono-culturalism would attempt to make the whole world like one's own civilization, and that brings conflict, and that won't work, either. To recognize the diversity of civilization, but to recommit oneself to one's own values, to recognize anew that which has given us birth, that which is at the foundation of that freedom and liberty and humane existence, the civility that has marked our civilization at its best would seem to be the path of wisdom.

As I think about the biblical story, we read Psalm 33 and its insight is that we will not live and survive by military might. That has been practiced and that has been our practice and, as the most powerful nation on earth, we have often been told that we must continue to be strong in order to preserve peace. There have been instances in the past where, thank God, we had the strength to turn away the aggressor and the tyrant. But we ought to recognize the wisdom of that Old Testament poet in that finally what we are all after, global security and peace, will not be secured by superior military might. A king is not saved by his armies, said the Psalmist, and the war horse is a vain hope for victory. Finally, you cannot arm yourself, you cannot have strength enough to repel every enemy and to remove every danger. We have to find it in some other way. Peace does not lie through military power, and if I move to that famous and disturbing Sermon on the

Mount, I hear Jesus talking about the law of retaliation, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and I recognize that there was a time when an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was a code of justice. What it says is that the penalty ought to meet the crime. An eye for an eye, not a life for an eye. It's a tooth for a tooth, not a life for a tooth. That was a step forward in human understanding.

But, Jesus goes beyond that. In the very, very disturbing moral imperative, Jesus suggests turning the other cheek, going the extra mile. And then, in the most radical of all suggestions, to love our enemies, for he says if you like the people who like you, big deal. If you love the people who love you, big deal. Everybody does that. It's natural to do that. It is human to do that. But, to love your enemies? That's divine. For he points to the God whose sun shines on the just and the unjust and the God whose rain waters the gardens of the good and the evil. The God of Jesus was a God of non-discrimination and humanity, in Jesus' image of things, is rooted in God, so that there is a common ground of humanity. God is the eternal ground and source and, therefore, because of that common ground and source, there is a common humanity and, consequently, all humanity deserves to be treated humanely and it is incumbent upon human beings to be humane, one to another without discrimination and without exclusion.

Well, I don't know what to do with Jesus' words. Some in the history of interpretation have said that's not for now, that's for when Jesus comes again and establishes a kingdom on earth. That's a future ethic.

Well, nice going, but it won't work. In all honesty, whether you want to take Jesus seriously or not, whether you think he was on to something or not, what we can't do is say he was talking about some future age in the Sermon on the Mount. That was immediate. That is here and now.

Others have said that's fine on an individual basis, but you can't do it in the corporate. Well, maybe it won't work, but I think that's what Jesus intended. I think that is what he was saying.

I don't quite know what to do with it. I think it would be helpful if, before we argued with it, we listened to it. If, before we reject it out of hand as some ridiculous kind of counsel, we let it seep into the pores of our being. We let that ethic simply be with us for a bit because, if it would saturate our being and seep into the pores of our nature, it would have to have some kind of effect on our spirit and on our attitude.

And finally, the human problem is a problem of attitude and spirit, and Jesus was suggesting that there is a common humanity that demands a universal humaneness and acceptance. Positively, we have to accept the civilizational diversity and even celebrate it. We should renew our own values and recognize the roots from which they have sprung, and celebrate them and preserve them, as well. And then, we ought to find those areas where the civilizational groupings overlap in common values, common, shared human values for justice and for

truth and compassion, rejecting murder, deceit, tyranny, torture and oppression, because if one takes those civilizational groupings at their best there is a shared value, there is a shared morality, a shared ethical sense which can be distilled and which each respective civilizational group committing itself to would make for the kind of security and peace and well-being that is necessary for our world that has come to a crossroads because of the tremendous power, because of the tremendous technological capacity, because of the fact that we have everything at hand to destroy the whole human experiment if we don't learn to live with justice and peace, one with another.

Certainly, the Christian church has not been a good example. I was just re-reading again the book that I'll be using in July by Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, the conflict in the 4th century in trying to establish the orthodox Christological formulation. After a century and more of bloody conflict, an edict of the Roman Empire established orthodox Nicene Christology and, when that was established, a group of Christians began to burn synagogues and pagan temples and massacre people, and the emperor as a responsible ruler demanded that they make restitution and that the leaders be punished, and the great and highly esteemed Bishop Ambrose of Milan said to the emperor, "Why should God's people be punished for destroying the heretics and the pagans? If you don't rescind your rule to punish, I will not serve you Holy Communion," and the emperor relented.

I suppose I tell you that little story because I started out where Ambrose was – not quite so violent, thank God – but with that kind of exclusionary attitude that ignorantly and arrogantly said, "This is it and this is true and only this is true." And then, by the miracle of grace and the Holy Spirit, those blinders began to fall off and I began to see the light and the grace in others and, rather than closing myself off and rejecting, began to open up and embrace and found a vitality and a joy and a celebration of life such as I never knew in that cramped and crimped orthodoxy that was wringing all of the joy of life out of me. I suggest that has happened to this community, as well, where we have learned the broadness of God's mercy, we have learned the freedom of throwing open our arms and embracing all and excluding none, and we have learned that breaking down the barriers that divide is the way to humanity, to grace and joy and blessing.

So I would suggest that, as a civilizational group, as a nation, there is possibility for us. There is possibility for the world. It may yet be a long way off. We'll have a good many battles yet to wage. But, finally, with an attitude and a spirit that has at least heard the word of Jesus, has recognized how it cuts against the grain of the human animal, but is indeed the voice of the Spirit, little by little we might move toward that day when we will not exclude the other, but rather, find ourselves celebrating that family of which we are a part, in harmony with the other families of the globe, and there would be peace on earth.

References:

Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Touchstone, 1997.

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