

“On God’s Side!?”
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Mark 8:31-38*

On Monday July 4th, Independence Day, I had the honor of sharing a prayer at the rededication of the Wyoming Monument. The band played rousing American music, the speaker gave an interesting talk on the importance of history, and the militia presented a volley of musket fire.

The following day I stood on the hallowed ground of Pickett’s Charge; on the battlefield of Gettysburg. Shawn, Victoria and I were in awe as we looked down the open field, where a major event continued to form a more perfect union.

We dined at the Rev. Alexander Dobbins home that evening. Rev. Dobbins built the house in 1776. In the mid 1800’s a “secret crawl space” was used to hide escaped slaves – on their way to freedom, via the “Underground Railroad.” Oh, and Rev. Dobbins was a Presbyterian.

The soup was especially delicious, but Victoria had a little trouble with the duck that she ordered.

The display was probably circa 18th century.

As I took in the sights of Gettysburg, my mind could not help but to focus on one of the greatest Presidents we have been blessed to have as our nation’s leader; Abraham Lincoln. Among his many attributes, was his depth of thinking about the ways of man and the ways of God.

Lincoln never joined a church, although he attended (mostly Presbyterian) churches. He derived from his culture, and religious sentiments a portion of Calvinism, which saw God as sovereign and moral, with ethical expectations for His creation.

Who among us has not etched these opening words into our hearts and minds; “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”? “...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

And only 16 months later, Lincoln penned and presented yet another magnificent speech, filled with pathos and promise; his second inaugural address. It is also filled with theology – God and humanity – consequences, forgiveness and hope for the future.

The Civil War has not yet ended, half a million have died. And he speaks, he quotes scripture. Referring to the North and South... “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

Endeavoring not to demonize the South. Recognizing the shared guilt and blame for slavery on both the South and North, Lincoln reflects that both sides share God's indictment, and both sides must accept their responsibility.

On occasion he declared: "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

But Lincoln was not the equivocating type. Of and with strong conviction, being on God's side meant – stopping slavery. In his 1860 Cooper Union address, before the Civil War commenced, he spoke of "...our conviction that slavery is wrong."

To be on God's side! Not always easy to interpret. But, sometimes it is! Our deep concern as citizens and as Christians is to endeavor by reasoning, by moral investigation what is the right position – is this decision – On God's Side?!

Thank God we've come a long way in accepting those who differ from us, and rightly so. Many positions are parochial, and merely cultural. I have my side, you (they) have your (their) side. And we can live with those "sides" Eucharistic differences. Liturgical differences. Dietary differences. Theological differences (to a large degree).

I'm reminded of this man arriving at the gates of heave. St. Peter ask, "Religion?" The man says, "Presbyterian." St. Peter looks down his list and says, "Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. "Religion?" inquires St. Peter. "Baptist" is the reply. St. Peter, "Go to room 18, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." A third man arrives at the gates of heave. "Religion?" "Jewish." "Go to room 11, but be very quiet when you pass room 8." The man says, "I can understand there being different room, for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass room 8?" St. Peter explains, "Well there is an Independent Christian group in room 8, and they think they are the only ones here."

Certain denominations may believe they are the true and only church, only they have it right, but within the American ethos, we make allowances, we exhibit toleration. We won't switch, but neither will we fight! You see, from our Nation's early years, and the memory of Religious wars on the Continent, we developed a way of living, allowing other dogmas to live next to us.

The Founding fathers believed religion was necessary for the moral health of our nation. Even into the 1950's, President Eisenhower could say and expect the populace to understand, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious belief, and I don't care what it is."

For under girding this ethos were Freedom, Rule of Law, Equality of persons and responsibility. These Religious convictions translated into civil government. They provided and provide the foundation for the healthy interchange of religious faith in America. My friends, this foundation is non-negotiable in how our nation pursues its future!

I'm going to share with you now, a subject of immense importance for our country and our world. I will not do it justice this morning, but I merely introduce a caution. You all know of my openness and respect for not only other denominations, but also other world Religions. So, keep that in mind as I share a caution and concern.

Valentines' Day has become popular in Saudi Arabia. But the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the Wahabi Institution, was going to systematically inspect hotels,

restaurants, coffee houses, and gift shops to prevent Muslim couples from giving each other Valentines or other presents. But, they let up, a little. Non-Muslims would not be molested by this government group if they celebrated behind closed doors. This group is notorious for bursting into the residences of foreigners to see if they are consuming liquor.

The sale of Valentine roses was forbidden in the malls and markets. But, do you know what? Saudi Muslims gave their beloveds Valentine gifts, more popular than ever! Red roses quickly sold out!

It looks as though women may be allowed to drive sometime in the future. Perhaps. Hopefully, the Bible will someday be permitted in the country.

This extreme Wahabism is convinced God's side is their side! Government and Religion are wedded. Yet citizens are on the move!

Many of us await strong Islamic voices to proclaim what we believe are universal foundations for any and all societies, cultures, civilizations; freedom, rule of law and equality of persons. A Muslim friend declares – Islam needs a transformation! These verities come through, in us, in Jesus Christ.

In today's Reading Jesus' disciples are asked about Jesus' identity. "Who am I?" (Implicit – "What do I stand for?") They finally get it, via Peter. Of course, being human they also mess it up. But, ever forward!

"You are the Messiah!"

Looking into our history, "You are the path we are to follow!"

"From you our lives will find meaning and purpose!"

"Truth, love, justice and mercy will flow from You, Jesus Christ!"

Whose side are you on?

We are living in serious and demanding times! Our mind set, our heart set, must not be God is on my side, but instead, I am on God's side, all the while realizing that "God's Side" is the side that rejects terror, and embraces those long fought and sought out verities

- Freedom
- Rule of Law
- Equality of persons.

"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 do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

On God's side!

Amen.