

“A Generous Patriotism”

Blue Hill Congregational Church (UCC) / Sunday, July 4, 2021
[Ezekiel 2. 1 – 5; Mk. 6. 1 – 13]

Rev. Dr. Mark S. Burrows, Ph.D.

Imagine your way with me back to the 1960s. There was unrest in the air. Recall the defining legislation of that period: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965; unrest and demonstrations in cities and towns across the country over segregation and protests against the War in Vietnam. I was coming of age during that decade, open to new strains of music—the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul & Mary (of course!), the Rolling Stones, and all the rest—and taken by the intellectual ferment and, yes, revolutionary spirit in the air.

But it was a deeply divided country. On the one hand, an emerging youth/student culture often pitted against older Americans; racial divisions and emerging movements like the “Black is beautiful” movement; a vibrant folk-music culture that seemed particularly alert to change; on the other, a strident resistance to all this, caught in the bumper-sticker slogan, “America: Love It or Leave It.” The church I then belonged to, as an adolescent and teenager, where I was confirmed in 1969, was the First Congregational Church (UCC), but it was at that time a mirror of these divisions and, indeed, the church split over a controversy involving the prophetic preaching of our minister, Darry Henneman, who was ousted by congregational vote on a bitter January night in 1970. My family left that church after this painful event, eventually establishing an ecumenical church that continues to thrive – some fifty years later – to this day.

That split seared through the circle of my friends, many of whose families stood on the side of judgment against a vigorous minority—including my parents—who stood in support of the minister. I’ve often thought of that church, which was instrumental in my early faith formation, with its American flag proudly displayed by the pulpit, as it is in so many Protestant congregations throughout our country. Patriotism seemed at odds with prophecy in that church, a conflict that has carried through the generations in this country, founded as it was out of a fervor for independence and shaped by aspirations gathered into succinct form in the Pledge of Allegiance: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Of course, in those years, even as a child, I knew something was not right in this. I grew up in the officially segregated South, in Arkansas and Oklahoma, where two societies existed side-by-side. We moved north when I was ten, into an unofficially segregated community in southern Wisconsin. Even at that time, that word “indivisible” in the “Pledge” seemed to a perilous hope, and the claim of “liberty and justice for all” did not ring true. I knew something was not right in all this, with the claims of a narrow patriotism holding onto an image of an America that I somehow knew was neither true nor right. The turmoil of that time came upon us like a storm in the night, with conflicts that left a long-lasting wound in this community—as in so many others across the country. I am sure you will have your own stories about this period of social unrest and change.

What has been clear to me—and you might well share something of this sense—is that our nation’s political life over recent years seems a not-so-distant echo to the tensions that shattered institutions, communities, and families during those years. Signs posted in yards mark the division: “BLM” on one side, with American flags bearing a blue stripe on the other. Contesting images of what matters in our time, troubled by a conflicting sense of what it means to honor our country.

Now, these are hardly new ideas. They are pulsing through the Hebrew scriptures, with the prophets rising up against any devotion to the “nation” of Israel rooted in narrow patriotism—capable of vilifying the “others” and refusing to remember, as a central theme in the Deuteronomic tradition had it, that “Remember that we were once slaves in Egypt” (Deut. 5. 15; 16. 12, etc.). Ezekiel stands in this line, one of the “latter prophets” who wrote from exile in Babylon (present-day Iraq), decrying Israel’s “impudence and stubbornness”: “Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day.” This is the beginning of trouble for Ezekiel who must stand against the narrow “nationalism” of his day and call the people to a larger vision of compassion and generosity—even as they lived through the trauma of being carried into exile, the great temple in Jerusalem destroyed and their heritage and hope imperiled.

And then the text appointed for today from Mark’s gospel, the account of Jesus returning to his home and warning his followers that “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Back home, in Nazareth, he “could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” The story ends with his warning, in sending his disciples out “two by two,” that they whenever they entered a house, they should “stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust on your feet as a testimony against them.” Prophets then, as now, are not always welcome, especially when they bring a hard word against their people.

It is a strange yet vivid image, this “shaking the dust of your shoes.” It runs against the image we often have of Jesus as gentle and mild-mannered, which he is in many of the stories recorded in the gospels. Here, we come upon his fierce sense of indignation, rooted in a long line of prophets going back to the early period of Israel’s history—when they chose to have kings ruling over them and began to trust in power and privilege even as they ruled a land they had taken from others. History continues to repeat itself, it seems, into our own day. Fear turns us against the weak and vulnerable; insecurity hardens our hearts toward those who are “other” than us; and, yes, national loyalty can blind us to the call to open those promises to all who face injustice and long for liberty among us.

Among those strident voices was one of the voices of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967), a poet whose work I never encountered in all the years of my schooling, discovering only during my years in university. In his poem, “I, Too,” he wrote:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

"Besides,/ They'll see how beautiful I am/ And be ashamed—/ I, too, am America."

This is a prophetic vision, one rooted in a generosity that the generation of our nation's "founding fathers" gestured toward, but failed to fully embody. It was this that led the Latinx poet Ada Limón (b. 1976) to write "A New National Anthem":

The truth is, I've never cared for the National Anthem. If you think about it, it's not a good song. Too high for most of us with "the rockets' red glare" and then there are the bombs. (Always, always there is war and bombs.) Once, I sang it at homecoming and threw even the tenacious high school band off key. But the song didn't mean anything, just a call to the field, something to get through before the pummeling of youth. And what of the stanzas we never sing, the third that mentions "no refuge could save the hireling and the slave"? Perhaps the truth is that every song of this country has an unsung third stanza, something brutal snaking underneath us as we blindly sing the high notes with a beer sloshing in the stands hoping our team wins. Don't get me wrong, I do like the flag, how it undulates in the wind like water, elemental, and best when it's humbled, brought to its knees, clung to by someone who

has lost everything, when it's not a weapon,
when it flickers, when it folds up so perfectly
you can keep it until it's needed, until you can
love it again, until the song in your mouth feels
like sustenance, a song where the notes are sung
by even the ageless woods, the shortgrass plains,
the Red River Gorge, the fistful of land left
unpoisoned, that song that's our birthright,
that's sung in silence when it's too hard to go on,
that sounds like someone's rough fingers weaving
into another's, that sounds like a match being lit
in an endless cave, the song that says my bones
are your bones, and your bones are my bones,
and isn't that enough?

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Such prophetic poems are the ones we need in our time, the ones that open us toward a deeper generosity than our tradition has often imagined—and bequeathed to us as a people. They remind us of the greatness of our nation's calling, even when this is for the time being yet unfulfilled. They also point to our persistent refusal to embrace this vision with generosity, and remind us of our need to commit ourselves to working for the day when the words “with liberty and justice for all” will be more than a slogan, more than wishful thinking, more than a strategy to congratulate ourselves prematurely.

Wendell Berry stands in the same prophetic tradition, reminding us of how our aspirations often fail to rise to the level of the ideals by which our country was founded. In the wake of the 1960s, he wrote a poem that has become and remains something of a clarion call of what true patriotism means. The poem, with the ambitious title “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” (1973), brings a word against any presumption that refuses to realize a generous patriotism. The poem turns in the second stanza to a startling and bracing exhortation:

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what [we]
ha[ve] not encountered [we] ha[ve] not destroyed. [. . .]

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,

lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

If there was revolution in the air, then, it seems to be so in our day as well as we yearn to fulfill the dream of a society where justice for all is the order of the day. We might even read this call as an invitation to “practice resurrection,” not simply as individuals but as a nation—committed to the full embrace of fashioning a society where we safeguard the rights of all citizens to “life, liberty and the pursuit of [their] happiness.” If there is unrest among us, let it be a sign of hope “to live in that free republic for which [the flag] stands.” And when we find ourselves weary on this long march toward freedom, and discouraged that the forces of resistance seem to have stronger arms, let us call on Ada Limon’s stirring call to sing “the song that says my bones/ are your bones, and your bones are my bones,/ and isn’t that enough?”