

The Widow vs. the Law

Romans 13:8, Luke 18:2-8

July 4, 2021

La Verne Church of the Brethren

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Across our beautiful country today people will gather for parades, barbecues, baseball games and fireworks. People will sing “God Bless America” and wear red, white and blue. And others, who have not experienced the United States of America as a land of equality and opportunity, will be highly conflicted by this day of celebration.

For my whole public school education, I stood every morning for the Pledge of Allegiance. I stood out of respect, but I did not say the words. My parents instilled in me that my allegiance was not to a flag but to God. My love of God, they said, would be what led me to love all people – the ones I knew as well as all the citizens of the world whom I didn’t know. Every morning...every morning I felt peculiar in my school and in my country.

That peculiarity has not lessened over time. It has only grown. When I try to explain how I love this country within the framework of loving God and my neighbor as myself, people don’t just think me peculiar, they label me unpatriotic. Patriotism and nationalism have become muddled. For many, love of this country means other countries are enemies. For some it means, “My country, right or wrong.” I felt called since I was a child to love this country enough to speak truth to power and struggle for the soul of our nation. I was taught to love enough to demand that we be a nation of justice...that the words “with liberty and justice for all” be a true statement about who we are...that racism, homophobia, misogyny and classism become part of our history and not our future. But I learned through many difficult encounters that this kind of love is suspect.

When I was in seminary, my preaching professor told a story about a friend of his from his seminary days. After graduation, this friend was placed in a pastorate in a predominately white church in Alabama during the civil rights movement. He was disillusioned by the congregation’s unwillingness to address the call for justice by their Black neighbors. One Sunday he got up at the pulpit to preach and he began to read from the big pulpit Bible. He started with a passage from Galatians:

You who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Then he looked up from the Bible and said to the congregation: “Oh, that’s right. We don’t believe that here.” Then he ripped out that page of the Bible and let it fall onto the floor of the sanctuary in front of the pulpit.

He turned to a different scripture and began to read:

A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

He stopped again, looked at his congregation and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. We don't believe that either." He ripped out that page and let it fall to the floor.

He kept doing that until he had a few pages left from Deuteronomy and Revelation. Needless to say, it was his last Sunday there. Our preaching professor told that as a cautionary tale. Preaching the gospel, I mean truly preaching the gospel of Christ is dangerous work. We Brethren know that truth. The Gospel is dangerous stuff.

For the last two years, this congregation has been very intentionally working on becoming an anti-racist congregation. Many members went through training and then formed themselves into racial justice working groups. After the death of George Floyd several members of our church worked together to transform the southeast corner of our church property into a social justice corner. They created prayer flags with the names of Black citizens murdered in our streets. We have done several book studies; learned how to address our City Councils about our concerns; examined our own lives; role played on how to have difficult conversations about racism; and striven to join in solidarity with other churches and organizations working for justice.

To our neighbors, the most visible part of that journey has been the prayer flags on the corner of our church property. As your pastor, I have received feedback, on your behalf. For those who have experienced the harsh reality of racism in our country, I hear only gratitude for our visible proclamation. From others I have received harsh rebukes by email and mail, signed and unsigned.

One of the repeated criticisms of our prayer flags is that we were honoring "criminals". I have found myself explaining, over and over again this past year that Ahmaud Arbery was out jogging when he was chased and gunned down by civilians. Tamir Rice was a twelve-year-old boy playing in the city park. Eric Garner was suspected of selling single cigarettes from a pack without a tax stamp. He died from a prohibited chokehold while being arrested for suspicion of selling a cigarette. We don't know if he was guilty of that crime because he did not receive due process. He died on the sidewalk after repeatedly saying, "I can't breathe". One person who was angry about our prayer flags wrote to me that churches need to preach "law-abiding" message. In the real-life scenario that led to the death of Eric Garner, I ask, "Who broke the law? Was it Eric Garner or was it the one who held him in a chokehold until he died?"

God did not come in the flesh to make sure that we were law-abiding, at least not to the laws of the state. Even the Apostle Paul, who seemed to value orderliness, wrote: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Our call is not to worship the god of law and order. We worship the God of love. The god of law and order and the God of love are not the same thing.

In the scripture that Sara read to us today we meet a widow who takes on the god of law and order. It is a story Jesus tells in which the vulnerable justice-seeker confronts

the unjust power holder. Every day the widow persistently shows up in the courtroom of the unjust judge. She refuses to “behave”...to wait patiently for justice....to shut up and dribble. Every day she shows up and calls out the behavior of the unjust judge. Every day she demands the justice that is being denied to her. The unjust judge uses the metaphor of boxing to describe how he is experiencing the persistent widow. Translators have softened it for us but in the Greek the judge says, “I will grant this widow justice so that in her continual coming at me she doesn’t give me a black eye.” Jesus tells the story in which the unrelenting justice-seeker wins against the law.

I have always liked this scripture but when I became a widow, I really learned to love it. This vulnerable woman’s unrelenting demand for justice intimidates the one who holds the power. It is hard for the judge to claim moral superiority when this woman keeps pointing out the truth...every day....in his courtroom....in front of everyone. He finally decides that it is best to make things right. Her resilience wins out. As it turns out, the widow is the one who holds the power, not the unjust judge. She holds the power because she stands on the side of truth.

As we confront the classism, racism, homophobia, misogyny and nationalism of our time it is vital that we remember our power. We are not insignificant in the struggle for justice that is born on the wings of love. We have such much power if we are standing on the side of love and demanding justice. Like the widow we have to be unrelenting in our pursuit. And it is much easier if we do this work together. We can’t sit down and shut up. We can’t worship the god of law and order over the God who calls us to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream....the God who call us to make reparations....the God who created the heavens and the earth and all the creatures of this universe....the God who loves George Floyd and Derek Chauvin...the God who demands our allegiance and loves us unconditionally....the God who doesn’t love one country more than another....the God who is calling America to be Beautiful.

As we go about this holiday, as we gather with family and friends and celebrate our independence, may we hear the words of America the Beautiful that Shawn Kirchner has reimagined for us:

America! America!
May God yet mend thine every flaw,
Redeem thy soul and be made whole,
Thy liberty in law.

America! America!
God shed His bounteous grace on thee,
Thy beauty crown with unity,
From sea to shining sea!

May we be about the courageous work of love for our country and pursue unrelentingly a beautiful America in which liberty and justice are the rights of all our citizens. Amen.