

A LOVER'S QUARREL WITH AMERICA¹

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

Micah 4:1-4 NRSV

So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

Luke 20:20-26 NRSV

The *Barmen Declaration* stands as a crucially important document in the history of Christianity, yet its existence is barely noted in seminary classrooms, much less in the sanctuaries of local churches. We ignore the lessons of this document at our own peril. The *Barmen Declaration* was signed on May 31, 1934 in Barmen, Germany by Christians who opposed the official church's capitulation to Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party. As the Nazis consolidated their hold on political power, the church essentially became a Nazi tool. Some church leaders went so far as to embrace not only Hitler's supremacist and anti-Semitic ideology but also to declare Hitler a new messiah for the German nation.

The Christian leaders, who dissented from the establishment view, created and signed the *Barmen Declaration*, which at first glance seems hardly controversial. The document states the signers' belief in Jesus Christ as the Word of God, to whom believers should listen and obey in life and death, along with their declaration as a false doctrine any time the church accepts something as a revelation from God apart from Jesus Christ. Yet, such declarations were entirely radical and confrontational in Hitler's Germany, where the Nazis demanded absolute obedience and the utmost allegiance. The signers of the declaration knew their statement was both a theological and a political act, because their reading of the Gospel of Christ set them at odds with their government. One scholar, Martin Niemöller, published a book entitled *Christus ist mein Führer* (Christ is My Leader) for which he received a prison sentence of seven years in Dachau. In Hitler's Germany, there was only one *Führer*—Hitler not Jesus. The very act of declaring that

your first allegiance is to Christ can get you into trouble when the state also desires that same allegiance.²

I share the story of the *Barmen Declaration* on the Sunday before July 4th not because I wish to equate the United States government with Nazi Germany—far from it—but because it is an extreme illustration of how one's commitment to Christ can set a believer on a path towards disagreement with and protest of one's government. Every government sees as its job to instill patriotism in the hearts of its citizens. Such loyalty requires citizens to obey their nation's laws and if need be to fight and die for the nation itself. Yet, as Christians, we are not merely citizens of a particular nation state but also citizens of the Kingdom or Realm of God. When we declare that Jesus Christ is our savior and lord, we do so without exceptions, so we must remember as Christians that our primary allegiance, above all else is to Christ. What our allegiance to Christ entails is a matter for debate and can mean different things to different people, but for it to mean anything significant, the believer must at least be open to the possibility that their loyalty to Christ may put them in conflict with those in temporal authority over them.

I titled my sermon today *A Lover's Quarrel With America*, because I like what the phrase implies. It recognizes that I love my country but that as in any loving relationship, I may quarrel with the one I love from time to time. The phrase was coined by William Sloane Coffin, who was a military intelligence officer in World War II, chaplain at Yale during the Vietnam years and pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. Coffin was arrested as a Freedom Rider during the civil rights era and arrested again for protesting the buildup of nuclear weapons in the 1980's. He was often asked by critics why he hated America. His reply was that he did not hate America rather he loved it. His actions amounted to a lover's quarrel rather than hatred, for he would not have bothered if he did not love America.³

Truly loving someone means having the courage to fight with him or her now and then. Loving someone means telling that person the truth he or she does not want to hear, especially when the truth is that person's behavior is hurtful towards others or towards herself or himself. Love means protesting and not contributing to a loved one's behavior when he or she will not see the truth. The same is true for love of our country.

When discussions turn to the role of the Christian in relationship to her or his country, today's Gospel reading is often the first place that people turn for instruction. This powerful passage, however, has unfortunately all too often been stripped of its power and treated as an injunction for the person of faith to simply support the status quo whatever that may be. When we look more closely, however, Jesus' words can be seen to be utterly subversive because of the demands they make upon the believer's life.

In the passage, we find Jesus at the beginning of his last week of life. His opponents are circling and looking for a way to ensnare him. One false step or poorly chosen word and they will have what they need to hand Jesus over to the Romans for an execution. Jesus' opponents ask him about paying taxes, a tricky question under the best of circumstances, but especially so in a country under Roman occupation. If he supports paying taxes to Caesar, he supports the hated occupier, but if he opposes paying taxes, he is a traitor to Roman rule. Jesus slips out of their snare with a deft verbal maneuver. He asks for a coin, and then asks whose image is on the coin?

When he receives the obvious reply that it is the emperor, he counters, “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The same phrase is more traditionally known in the form provided in the King James translation “Render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s, and render unto God the things which be God’s.” Sounds simple enough, right?

Or maybe not.

On the silver coin was the image of the emperor Tiberius and under it was the inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.”⁴ In other words, Tiberius claimed to be a son of a god, so here Luke’s Gospel presents us with the ironic situation of the true Son of God holding a coin bearing the likeness of a human ruler who claims to be the son of a different god. The irony was apparently lost on Jesus’ audience.

By asking about the *image* on the coin, Jesus makes a subtle yet powerful theological statement. Since the “divine” image on the coin represents a certain kind of authority, then give to that authority what it deserves. The emperor’s *image* is on the coin, so give the emperor his taxes. At the same time, he instructs his listeners to give to God what God deserves. If the location of the emperor’s image reveals what belongs to the emperor, where can the image of God be found?

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27 NRSV)

We are created in the image of God. We are imprinted by God’s very essence. Since the image of God is found in people like you and me, Jesus’ statement reveals that what we should be giving to God is something much more substantial than money. We are to give to God our very lives—our selves—the essence of who we are as people. The fact that you and I are created in the image of God demands that we give to God more than any earthly power or government—no matter how good or noble—can ever ask from us.

So, there it is. Our first allegiance must be to God. Our allegiance to our country must always be secondary. So, what exactly do we do with these statements? How do we actually make use of them in our daily efforts to be good Christians and good Americans? Answering these questions is not easy. As the great theologian and ethicist, Robert McAfee Brown, wrote about this passage, “We have to acknowledge that, like most Splendid Principles, this one is a little short on practical help in making day-to-day decisions.”⁵ Yet, it is precisely during such day-to-day decisions about how we vote, what we believe, what we protest, how we talk in the coffee shop about politics and what we allow to be done in our names that we must live out our faith and seek to be true to the one we claim to serve.

Back in May I went to a conference on preaching in Nashville. At this event, I heard some of the greatest preachers alive today, but it was not a preacher but a professor who offered a lecture in rather subdued tones that rallied the audience of ministers to their feet applauding and cheering. That professor was Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of Hebrew Bible who teaches at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta. Brueggemann spoke about empires not only in the days of ancient Israel and Jesus but also in our own day. He charged that

Empires of every time period retain power through promoting fear and certitude—fear of external and internal threats and certitude that they possess the only means of eliminating those threats. In order to guarantee allegiance, empires point to the “abyss,” a metaphor Brueggemann used for fear and despair. As long as people remain afraid, they remain obedient. Empires have a vested interest in convincing their people that the “abyss” is all that exists. It was true for Babylon, It was true for Rome. It is true for America today.

The antidotes to the “abyss” are hope-telling and truth-telling. Just who will offer hope and truth in times of uncertainty and fear? People of faith, that’s who—provided they will follow in the steps of the prophets before them. The prophets offered a vision from God that there was more to existence than despair. They offered hope. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible offered a vision of peace and restoration to a people in exile and captivity. Jesus offered a vision of the Kingdom of God to a people under the yoke of Rome. They still speak today. The passage we read this morning from Micah reminds us that war and terror are not all there is. They do not have the last word, and we do not have to live as if they do. God has the last word and it is one of peace, love and grace. The vision of spears turned into pruning hooks and swords turned into plowshares is not a utopian fantasy. It is a reality that is beginning now; a reality we can help create if we stop staring into the “abyss.”

Prophets also offer truth to politicians of every age. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke a little while back about the erosion of trust in governments that justify war under false pretenses.

Credible claims on our political loyalty have something to do with a demonstrable attention to truth, even unwelcome truth. A government that habitually ignored expert advice, habitually pressed its interests abroad in ways that ignored manifest needs and priorities in the wider human and non-human environment, habitually repressed criticism or manipulated public media—such a regime would, to say the least, jeopardize its claim to obedience.⁶

The governments he was speaking of included his own in the United Kingdom and ours here in America. Brueggemann declared at the conference I attended that the truth prophets declare is that “we live in a morally coherent universe and our current choices result in appropriate consequences.” When our nation chooses to acknowledge that each and every human is created in the image of God regardless of whether they happen to be American or not, the appropriate consequence is that we, ourselves, are diminished. We suffer, because we brutalize the humanity of others and ourselves.

The most glaring example of our own country’s brutalization of other humans made in the image of God has occurred in the cases where our government has sought to justify torture. When news broke of torture at Abu Ghraib, Ghantamo and other places around the globe, our government responded by doing all it could do to get the American public to stare into the “abyss” of fear during the so-called “War on Terror.” It has generated fear in order to justify the torture of those deemed to be the enemies of America.

The Washington Post ran an article this past week about how certain individuals in the Executive Branch sought to make a legal case to justify acts that are considered torture by every civilized nation in the world⁷. They worked to get the narrowest definition of torture possible, essentially defining torture as only things that lead to organ failure and/or death. Their purpose for doing so was so that the President of the United States and other officials could say with a straight face that the United States does not torture people, while at the same time American soldiers and agents could continue interrogation techniques that, if they were committed against our soldiers, would be denounced at the highest levels. Under these efforts, definitions of what is “cruel” “inhumane,” and “degrading” were reworked so that anything short of flat out killing someone is justified. In these cases, our government mistook its own image for the image of God. As Christians who worship a God who was tortured and killed by an empire, at the very least we should be alarmed when our government wishes to torture someone in our name. We must remember that the cross that decorates our sanctuary and that we wear around our necks was itself a torture device.

The argument for torture of individuals declared “terrorists” or “unlawful combatants” or “detainees” by our government is the so-called “ticking bomb scenario.” Under this view, if there was a ticking bomb somewhere that could kill innocent people and you had someone in custody who had information that could help you stop that bomb from going off, then any means necessary should be used to protect innocent people. The problems comes, of course, in defining what exactly constitutes a ticking bomb, whether or not the person in custody really knows anything and even if they do, whether or not information gleaned from torture can really be considered reliable..

I understand this scenario on a personal level. I served for five and a half years at my previous church in New York, and just about every Sunday I looked out in the congregation to see one or both of the families in our church who had loved ones die in the World Trade Center on September 11. I did not know the two men in that church who died on that fateful day (I started work there two weeks after September 11), but I did get to know their widows and children very well. I would do just about anything to somehow spare them the pain and sorrow they endured. If I could know for sure that torturing someone could prevent another September 11, I would be tempted to support it, and that’s why I need my own faith, a faith that believes each person is created in the image of God—even terrorists--to raise my eyes from the “abyss” and look beyond it to the hope God provides.

The debate over the semantics of torture represents to me in graphic terms how governments attempt to distort reality to suit their own purposes. Robert McAfee Brown wrote in the 1980’s about American policies in Central America, and he drew parallels between the U.S. government’s attempts at spinning the news and the tactics of the government portrayed in George Orwell’s *1984*. Brown did not equate the U.S. government with Big Brother and I do not wish to do so today either, but rather he noted “Orwellian” tendencies of the American government.⁸ Just as Big Brother declared “War is Peace,” so also our government is capable of refusing to acknowledge the violence it unleashes. Just as Big Brother declared “Freedom is Slavery,” so also our government is capable of taking away freedoms in the name of national security. Just as Big Brother declared “Ignorance is Strength” so also our government is capable of hiding behind classified documents and executive privilege.

Our response as people of faith to such versions of reality must be to offer an alternative reality. We must speak the truth of God's love and the essential worth of every human being. We must speak the hope that God can provide us with alternatives to the violence of empire. If we are to truly love America, we must be willing to quarrel with it from time to time. Amen

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¹ This phrase was used by William Sloane-Coffin to describe his relationship with America, although I am unsure of the source where he first used it. I chose it as a title for my sermon on the Sunday before July Fourth, because I sense in the phrase an articulation of how I feel about America on my better days. I should credit, however, Rev. Jimmy Only, who also used this phrase as a sermon title one year ago on the Sunday before July Fourth. I shamelessly copied him in using the quotation for my own sermon.

² Robert McAfee Brown, *Saying Yes and Saying No: On Rendering to God and Caesar* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 19-23. For a detailed history of the relationship between the German church and the Nazis, see J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches: 1933-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

³ As I mentioned above, I do not know where that quote comes from. Those who know Coffin's work better than I will undoubtedly be able to recall it from memory. To learn more about William Sloane Coffin read his autobiography *Once to Every Man* (New York: Atheneum, 1977) or see the documentary *William Sloan Coffin: A Lover's Quarrel With America* (available at http://www.olddogdocumentaries.com/vid_wsc.html). An excellent interview of Coffin by Bill Moyers is available at <http://www.pbs.org/now/society/coffin.html>.

⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 386.

⁵ Brown, *Saying Yes and Saying No*, 38.

⁶ Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, "John Mere's Commemoration Service," St. Benet's Church, Cambridge, April 20, 2004. As quoted in Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 147.

⁷ Barton Gellman and Jo Becker, "Pushing the Envelope on Presidential Power," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2006. You can read this article at http://blog.washingtonpost.com/cheney/chapters/pushing_the_envelope_on_presi/index.html

⁸ Brown, *Saying Yes and Saying No*, 26-29.