

Sermon for July 2, 2017 Independence Day Weekend

Sermon Series: A Summer of Heroes - "Daniel's Courage: Civil Disobedience"

Daniel 6:6-16

The book of Daniel tells us the story of Daniel and other faithful Jews who were taken prisoner in Israel and carried off into exile in Babylon and later under the Persians. In exile they stay true to their faith in God even though it sometimes puts them at odds with the culture and political powers around them. They refused to eat unclean foods or to bow down to idols. And God blesses them, especially Daniel, who climbs in the ranks of the court. His wisdom and dedication endears him to the king who values him highly. But God's blessing on him cause others to be jealous. So they plot to eliminate him.

That is where our scripture picks up the story. They know that Daniel is faithful so they decide to entrap him by inducing the King to give an edict that for a month all people are to pray only to him. As soon as Daniel hears of this edict, he goes home to pray. What's a person of faith to do when a plot like this hatched against them, but to pray to God for help! Yet Daniel doesn't hide the fact that he is praying! He prays in front of an open window.

It's an open and shut case. Daniel, the King's golden boy, has flagrantly broken an edict. So he is thrown in the lion's den to be eaten alive. So what happened to Daniel? God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths and he was set free and God was glorified.

But forget that last part. That is the part that children's Sunday School and VBS classes often emphasize, and it is important. But Daniel did not know that would happen. He didn't defy the King thinking "Oh, God will send an angel to save me." He probably knew that was a possibility, but he also knew that God might also allow him to be killed: martyred as a witness to his faith. Still he prayed to God openly and in defiance of the King's order.

This story of courage and bravery on Daniel's part has given people of faith courage down through the centuries. This story encouraged Jews as they lived under the Greeks and later the Romans to remain faithful even though they were persecuted. I am sure, as Christians were being fed to wild animals, they recalled this story. It even inspired Gandhi in the 20th century. As his people were suffering under the colonial rule of Great Britain, he learned from the wisdom and faith of Daniel.

Gandhi used Daniel's faithful disobedience of the king as a model for his own program of civil disobedience. Just as Daniel openly, and peacefully, defied the unjust edict of King Darius, Gandhi led a movement to openly and peacefully defy the rule of Britain. This peaceful civil disobedience also inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. in his struggle for civil rights. This biblical example of civil disobedience as applied by Gandhi in India, was adapted by King. It formed the basis of King's nonviolent social action against racist and unjust laws in America.

This defiance of the government was all about recognizing a higher law of justice. It was about standing up to edicts that were in contradiction to God's law of mercy and justice. This defiance was not done in secret, but in the open, and included enduring the punishment for breaking the laws as a way of spotlighting the unjustness of those laws.

So people peacefully and nonviolently broke laws that denied voting rights or that segregated people based on the color of their skin. And they filled the jails with people who would then sing freedom song in their cells. Then they would go to trial and those trials would shine the light of truth on the injustice being done.

Now some Christians are uncomfortable with this. After all the Bible tells us to obey the civil authorities. (Romans 13:1) Jesus said to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” (Matt. 22:21) So can a Godly person willingly and knowingly break the law? The Bible gives us examples of people of faith like Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and the Christians who refused to worship Caesar.

The issue is what we should do when God’s law conflict with earthly laws. If I were to decided that red should mean go and green should mean stop and I starting going on red; that would not be Christian Civil disobedience. There is nothing in God’s law that says what colors should be go or stop, so conforming to the laws of the land is not in contradiction with serving God. Where earthly laws and God’s laws do not conflict we should follow earthly laws. Even if that means driving on one side of the road in one country and on the other in another country according to each nation’s law and custom.

But in matters of justice sometimes God’s law calls us to peacefully disobey earthly authorities. When King Darius’ edict told Daniel to pray to a human or the three lads to bow down to an idol, they were called to peacefully disobey those laws. If we are talking about equality and human rights, we may find that following God’s law of love puts us in opposition to earthly laws. This was the basis of civil disobedience among abolitionists, suffragettes, and the civil rights movement in our own nation’s past. In cases like those, we are called, as Daniel was, to break the law; to defy unjust edicts and to do so in Godly nonviolent ways.

Jesus said to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” The important phrase there is “to God the things that are God’s.” As Christians our first priority is to worship and serve God above all else. We can love our country and be loyal to it, but only to the extent that it does not put us in conflict with our loyalty to God. We answer to the eternal law of God first, then to the temporal law of the civil authorities. The Bible says nothing about whether you should go on green or red or what side of the road you should drive on. In those laws we render unto Caesar. But at times, in matters of righteousness and justice, the civil authorities are in conflict with God’s law.

So down through the ages some Christians, like Daniel, have chosen to defy the government. Helping slaves escape to Canada or helping Jews escape Nazi Germany are two modern examples. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and their method of nonviolent social action is another example.

Love your country. Sing “God Bless America.” Lord know we need a blessing! But like Daniel, recognize that devotion to God always comes first. Be ready to peacefully resist, and even civilly disobey, your country for the sake of love, justice, and human rights.