

“What Is God Trying to Tell Us?”

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I Kings 18:20-29, 36-39

Romans 12:1-2

This past week I got a haircut. After you’ve been to the same barber for 8 years, it’s a big shock to go to another barber. You’ve got to know something about my old barber, Carl. Carl was an expert on everything. If you don’t believe that, just ask Carl and he would tell you. So, after eight years I was not only looking for a barber, I was looking for a barbershop. I wasn’t looking for a styling salon or some other kind of foo-foo place. I was looking for a barbershop.

I thought I had found one. When I went inside, there were two barbers sitting at a table playing cards. I thought, “I’ve found a barbershop.” They were in no big hurry. The guy who was the proprietor or, I think the owner of the shop said, “We’ll be done in a few minutes.” So I waited until they finished their game of *Skip-Bo*, then I sat down in the chair and about two minutes later I was finished.

The barber’s name is Hairy. Get it? H-a-i-r-y. It’s a great name for a barber, but it’s not Hairy the Barber. It’s Hairy the Hacker. He’s also known as Hairy Scissorhands. Hairy must have been a barber in the military. He cut my hair as if he were doubled parked in a no-parking zone. In the couple of minutes I was in the chair, however, Hairy mentioned what inevitably nearly every barber mentions. “What do you think about all this rain?” Then he gave me the title for today’s sermon: What is God Trying to Tell Us?”

On this Freedom and Democracy Sunday, what is God trying to tell us? There is a movie that has come out recently called “Evan Almighty. “ If you can believe it, it’s a story about Noah and the great flood. But our faith teaches us the difference between a wet spell and a great flood. There are some persons whose homes have been flooded – I hate that; we can be grateful that our church will be doing things through the agencies of our church to help some of those through the Week of Compassion offering.

In western Oklahoma I always thought it important to know the difference between the wind and a tornado. In western Oklahoma, the wind nearly always blows, but it usually just

seems as if it is a tornado—it's not really a tornado. I guess in eastern Oklahoma it's important to know the difference between a wet spell and the great flood.

Our faith teaches us something else on this Sunday. We come this morning as citizens of two kingdoms: we are citizens of this country, but we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. Let me give you an example of what this means and how it affects our worship.

At this time I am going to ask every person who is present here this morning who has served in the military in some way to stand. Would you stand at this time and remain standing? We want to recognize you for your service and honor you and respect you for your service. Would you express your appreciation to these men and women? Thank you. You may be seated.

If I were to ask now how many of us who are present believe in the one true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, you would all stand. We come here this morning to worship that God. This is not a patriotic rally—that's not what worship is about. We come to worship the one true God, and I believe this can be a time of conflict for us as disciples of Christ. We are disciples, or followers, of the one who is known as the Prince of Peace, living in a time of war. Listen to what one person said about this:

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount . . . The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

Omar Bradley

It was a soldier who spoke these words, the soldier's soldier, the soldier's general. Omar Bradley spoke these words. I believe this is what educators call a teachable moment – a Sunday such as today. I read of a couple of ministers who weren't going to be present in their worship service today. They were new to their church—they had been there about the same amount of time I've been serving with you. They decided that because the worship service had been planned before they arrived and it was going to be a service similar to ours, there were going to be some patriotic songs sung, that they could not, in good conscience, be at that worship service. I thought, “What a shame that is,” because this is a teachable moment.

This is a time when we, as people of faith, can give thanks to God that we live in a country

that has freedoms that others only dream about in other countries. But as a part of our worship, also, we come to repent. In our hymn of discipleship today, we are going to sing these words about our nation: “God, mend thine every flaw.” When we sing those words, it is an admission on our part that our country is certainly not perfect – that we have flaws, but it is not as some would have us believe—a country that is only filled with flaws.

We do have much as a country, however, for which to repent. We can repent of the divisions in our society, divisions caused by race and economic differences and religious differences. We can repent of the violence in our country—violence that causes many of us to live with fear.

Just this past week one day out in the hallway one of the classes from the Child Development Center passed me in the hallway. I like to say hi to them and they like to say hi to me. If there are 12 of them, I say hi 12 times. They’ve gotten kind of used to this and this past week as they walked by the first little child held up his hand and said, “Give me five.” You know what all the rest of them did—except for one little girl. She seemed afraid. As she walked past me, she stepped to the side a little. I’m sure her parents have taught her about being afraid of strangers, but I’m not a stranger to her anymore. I’ve seen her before, she’s seen me. I believe that little girl’s fear is a metaphor for what happens in much of our country— for the way we live in fear.

We can repent because of the lack in values in our country. I received one of those money-raising schemes in the mail recently. On the outside of the envelope was the story of one man who had followed this scheme and made a ton of money. He said, “My goal in life has always been to own a BMW.” How sad that is, to think that one’s goal in life is to own a certain brand of automobile.

The writer, Somerset Maugham said, “If a nation values anything more than freedom, it will lose its freedom.” In the church, we say our freedom is in Christ, but with that freedom comes the responsibility to live a certain way. Paul said we are not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Our faith teaches us that there is a difference between religion and faith. Listen to a few of these differences.

Religion says to us, “God Bless America.” Our faith says to us, “For God So Loved the World.” Religion says to us, “God is on our side.” Faith says to us, “Lord, help us to seek your

will so that we might be on your side.” Religion says to us, “I thank God I’m not like other people.” Our faith teaches us to say, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Religion teaches us to pray “Gimme prayers.” “Gimme this, gimme that, gimme that BMW, gimme more money.” Our faith teaches us to pray, “Thy will be done.”

On Freedom and Democracy Sunday our faith teaches us that church and state need to be separated. It is wrong to wrap the Bible in a flag. I believe it cheapens both. Our flag stands for more than the book of one religion, and our Bible certainly stands for more than one country.

On Freedom and Democracy Sunday, we are called to pray for the military personnel of our country. A couple of weeks ago when I was going to the hospital, of all the cars in Tulsa that I could pull up behind at a stop light, I pulled up behind a car that had three bumper stickers on the rear bumper. One of the bumper stickers said, “My grandson is in the Air Force.” The middle bumper sticker said, “My grandson is in the Army.” The third bumper sticker said, “My son is a sailor.” Can you imagine how this one man feels who has two grandsons and a son serving in the military when some would discredit what they try to do?

Our faith teaches us not only about separation of church and state, but it says to us there need not be alienation of church and state. Our faith is to be a leaven in our society. Our political structure, for the most part, is broken. Anyone with a lick of sense knows that. We have most politicians who care not what is best for the country but what they can do to get reelected. We need people of faith serving in those positions. We need people of faith serving in the military. Do we want to leave that to the atheists? We need people of faith serving as police officers. Do we want to leave our law enforcement to persons who are not people of faith?

Our faith also teaches us, however, to pray not only for our military personnel but to pray for all nations. Elijah didn’t understand this. Do you know what happens immediately following the scripture I read? We read in I Kings that Elijah seizes the 450 prophets of Baal and kills all of them.

One day on another mountain (not Mt. Carmel, but another mountain) there was a contest between one man and the most powerful government in the world—the Roman government. On that mountain, Jesus understood as Elijah did, however, that one man and God always make a majority. On that mountain—that mountain called Calvary, Jesus understood what God was

trying to tell us. It was not that God is going to send another flood—it is not that God will consume the world with fire. On that mountain on that day during that contest, Jesus taught us that God is trying to tell us this: “I love you. I love all of you. You are all my children.” It is our challenge now to go out and share this good news—on Freedom and Democracy Sunday—and always. Amen.