



Image of Freedom from Kingpinlifestyle.com

We are to love the sojourner. (Deut.10:18-22) This is evidently connected to our ability to fear (be devoted to) God. By showing our concern for the aliens and the destitute among us, we recognize the abundance of mercy that we have received, especially those of us who are blessed enough to live in this wonderful land of ours. When Jesus said, the poor you shall always have among you, we should on the one hand welcome this statement as an encouraging promise. Yes, we have a Christian responsibility to show charity to all those who are in need, and not just our friends – those are Jesus' instructions in the Gospel lesson of today. But thank God for the food banks, and homeless shelters, and soup kitchens which allow people like you and me to be in proximity of those in our culture who are in pain. You see, the poor in our society are the most

expedient way to keep ever before us just how blessed we are (Because it's true, there but for the grace of God...) And good people, I know there are varying degrees of affluence in this congregation today. But since I think everyone here has a flushing toilette in their home, you are by default among the wealthier inhabitants of this earth.

Conversely, by shutting the aliens, the homeless, the addicted out of our lives, no such recognition of just how blessed we are is required. And then, when we do not have the specter of the broken-ness in this world before us, a strange thing can start to happen. We can begin to forget just how much need there is in this world. And we can begin to forget just how blessed we are in this land. And soon, there becomes no more critical need for the God who requires us to practice justice for the fatherless and the widow, and to love the sojourner, and to give food to the hungry. When we remove from our midst the evidence of our broken-ness, God can become just an after-thought, something we try to fit into the cracks of our lives. Yes, thank God for the poor among us, for they are the clearest reminder to us of our own providence, and of the God from whom all blessing comes.

Hebrews 11:8-16 demonstrates so clearly how we are all sojourners, so ill-equipped to provide for our own freedom. The marvelous irony about fighting for the freedom of this great land is that those who accept this calling are fighting to protect the right to proclaim our weakness. This country was founded upon the belief that from our Creator we have certain inalienable rights. And so when we fight to preserve our freedom, we fight to preserve the right to profess, proclaim, and serve a God who gives us a victory founded on our ability to understand just how frail we really are.

The assurance of our freedom is based on our coming to know just how much we need to be servants to his grace and mercy, if we're going to be really free. We are his servants, so that we can be free. What a mighty and marvelous mystery!

In the Gospel Lesson for today (Matthew 5:43-48) Jesus requires us to love our enemies. How hard this is to do, and clearly impossible on human terms. But by the grace of God it is possible. My mother tells me that my grandfather, her father, as a Second Lieutenant in the Signals Corps, was in one of the so called "Christmas Truces" of World War 1. According to the British Imperial War Museum, these began late on Christmas Eve of 1914, when men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) heard German troops in the trenches opposite them singing carols and saw lanterns and small fir trees along their trenches. Messages began to be shouted between the trenches.

The following day, British and German soldiers met in no man's land and exchanged gifts, took photographs and some played impromptu games of football. They also buried casualties and repaired trenches and dugouts. After 1914, the High Commands on both sides tried to prevent any truces on a similar scale happening again, so that the war could be prosecuted efficiently. But evidently, man's humanity would not let him fully cooperate. There continued to be isolated incidents of soldiers holding brief truces throughout in the war, especially at Christmas. In what was known as the 'Live and Let Live' system, in quiet sectors of the front line, brief pauses in the hostilities were sometimes tacitly agreed, allowing both sides to repair their trenches or gather their dead.<sup>i</sup>

I have never been in war, but I think at some point during one of these great armed struggles there always come moments like the Christmas Truce of World War I; moments crystalized in time when the combating forces realize, if only fleetingly, that the enemy, the real enemy is the violence itself.

I find it impossible to think of war as a Priest without dwelling for a moment on Chapter 7 of Luke's Gospel, which tells us of the humble and righteous Centurion. This military officer who I quote on my knees every time I celebrate the Eucharist, the one who said, "Lord, I am not worthy for you to come under my roof" had spent a life focused on obedience – Obedience to the commands of his superiors, and ensuring that the commands he issued to his subordinates were obediently executed.

In a way I'm not sure I can completely explain, there seems to be a link here which is forged between the practice of obedience and the development of strong faith.

Obedience and faith. Apparently, one nourishes the other, and in fact the faith of this humble Centurion, this foreigner was praised by none-other than Jesus himself. And it is this faith, which in some way is championed by our obedience, it is this faith that, by God's grace sets us free.

It is such a puzzling thing, this truth of Jesus Christ that truly sets us free. The alternative is to relinquish that freedom by accepting servitude to a person, or regime, or set of convictions that can only perpetrate a lie based on the belief that someone, or some group, or some system is capable of transforming man into a shining vision of deity whereby through technology, or compliance, or conforming "evolution," we can come to such a place of self-extoling, egocentric exaltation, that we can fix the world of all its blemishes and live out our lives in blissful utopia. It is just one more variation on the fraud promised by the great deceiver in Eden's grove. Good people, there is a reason why they call it snake-oil.

It is such a fragile thing, this country of ours. You and I are so blessed as to live precisely in the middle of the most shining experiment human-kind has undertaken. The practice of fairness based on the better angels in man's nature, and a belief in the righteousness enshrined in the harmonies of nature and of nature's God has gifted us a land that few can even dream to inhabit. But in some respects this country of ours is a little like the mythical land of Brigadoon. If anyone of its inhabitants ever left Brigadoon, the land would disappear. Instead, you and I live in a place which, if too many of us abandon the guiding principles of a land by the people, of the people, and for the people of one nation under God with liberty and justice for all, if too many of us abandon those commitments or simply delegate their authority to someone more interested than ourselves, well...if that happens too often, who's to say whether we will continue as this shining land of hope and glory, or simply dwindle and eventually fade into history's memory just another Brigadoon. Yes, the value of a thing is in its cost. You and I have been given a priceless legacy, so worth our sacrifice. Because if a value of a thing is in its cost then there are those for whom our freedom has cost dearly indeed. And we honor them today.

The author of Hebrews tells us, we are also citizens of another homeland. And in that homeland we have a King who has already paid the highest tax. And the books have been balanced on the greatest cost that ever was. And that kingdom of which you and I are citizens is and everlasting kingdom, a shining city on the highest hill. The King of this land is Love's Lord, we are his subjects, and it is a kingdom that shall never pass away.

JWB+ 6/29/17

<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-real-story-of-the-christmas-truce>