

PENTECOST VI

Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person;” Luke 10:5

The prosperity of Israel.

The wonderful works of God.

The responsibilities of community.

God’s peace.

And the Fourth of July.

We celebrate all of this today.

For thus says God: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. Isaiah.

*God holds our souls in life, *and will not allow our feet to slip. The Psalmist*

All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Paul

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The realm of God has come near to you.' Luke

And the Fourth of July.

I’ve just finished reading a biography of Abigail and John Adams. A biography of their marriage, a marriage in which the personal and the political were inextricably intertwined. But a biography of the marriage, so I didn’t have to struggle too hard to re-understand Federalism versus Republicanism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

One thing I learned is that John Adam, in the debates and discussions about crafting our system of government, believed that elected officials should have titles, titles like “his highness the President” or “his Excellency.” That position has earned him an undeserved reputation as a monarchist; in fact, he was not, but having served in diplomatic posts in Europe and England during the early years of the Republic, he believed that titles would be necessary to earn our elected leaders recognition, respect, and status with foreign powers.

John Adams lost this battle, and for that I think we may be grateful. But he seems to have understood something that sociologists are studying and documenting today, as evidenced by a sub-head in last Sunday's *Globe*: *Why hierarchy matters, even in an egalitarian world*, an article by Drake Bennett.

The article kicked off with mention of General McCrystal's insubordination and subsequent removal from his command in Afghanistan, the disqualification of an errant French soccer player for insulting a coach. But it goes on to say

What was at stake in each was a very basic idea: deference to the social hierarchy. Where people stand on the social ladder is a fact that governs all sorts of daily interactions, as well as how we build organizations, police one another's behavior, and understand our own identity. It's also something that social scientists are taking an increasing interest in. Talk of hierarchy or social rank may sound antiquated, especially in countries like America and France that each had its own revolution two centuries ago to overthrow an aristocratic political and social order. If all men are created equal, then thinking and talking about rank seems pernicious, a recipe for inflated egos on the one hand or crippled self-esteem on the other.

But psychologists who study status and power in social settings - and a growing number are - have found that human beings, in surprising ways, actually seem to thrive on a sense of social hierarchy, and rely on it. In certain settings, having a clear hierarchy makes us more comfortable, more productive, and happier, even when our own place in it is an inferior one. In one intriguing finding, NBA basketball teams on which large salary differentials separate the stars from the utility players actually play better and more selflessly than their more egalitarian rivals.

Jesus understood this. On the one hand, he did not hesitate to challenge authority when he found it arbitrary and oppressive. On the other hand, he continually emphasizes to his disciples that that's what they were, disciples. He was their leader. He could do things they couldn't do - cast out certain demons, perform certain healings. But *they* could do things their intended audience, or clients, or whatever we want to call the folks they visited and ministered to - they could do things those folks couldn't. The disciples were thrilled that certain demons *did* submit to them.

Paul reminds his community in Galatia of that fact. *All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.*

So, the comfort of knowing our place in the hierarchy, on the one hand. And on the other, an Op Ed in Monday's *New York Times*, headlined *The Triumphant Decline of*

the WASP. This kicks off with mention of Elena Kagan's nomination to the Supreme Court. If she's confirmed, the Court will consist of 6 Roman Catholics and 3 Jews. Noah Feldman writes:

It is cause for celebration that no one much cares about the nominee's religion. We are fortunate to have left behind the days when there was a so-called "Catholic seat" on the court, or when prominent Jews (including the publisher of this newspaper) urged President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1939 not to nominate Felix Frankfurter because they worried that having "too many" Jews on the court might fuel anti-Semitism.

But satisfaction with our national progress should not make us forget its authors: the very Protestant elite that founded and long dominated our nation's institutions of higher education and government, including the Supreme Court. Unlike almost every other dominant ethnic, racial or religious group in world history, white Protestants have ceded their socioeconomic power by hewing voluntarily to the values of merit and inclusion, values now shared broadly by Americans of different backgrounds. The decline of the Protestant elite is actually its greatest triumph.

... when discussing the white elite that exercised such disproportionate power in American history, we are talking about a subgroup, mostly of English or Scots-Irish origin, whose ancestors came to this land in the 17th and 18th centuries. Their forebears fought the American Revolution and wrote the Constitution, embedding in it a distinctive set of beliefs of Protestant origin, including inalienable rights and the separation of church and state.

It is not as though white Protestants relinquished power quickly or without reservation. Catholic immigrants, whether from Ireland or Southern Europe, faced a century of organized discrimination and were regularly denounced as slavish devotees of the pope unsuited to democratic participation.

(And) the Protestant governing elite must also bear its own share of responsibility for slavery and racial discrimination.

Yet, after the ideals of meritocratic inclusion gained a foothold, progress was remarkably steady and smooth.

So, social hierarchy and meritocracy. Can we fit these two ideas together, and if so, can we relate them to our Christian community? I think the answers are yes and yes.

Here's an international example. Much as I caution you all against paying too much attention to the goings on of the Anglican Communion, most of us are not innocent

of knowledge that there's great friction between the Episcopal Church USA and some members of the wider communion. The apparent fracture points have been the election and consecration of one and now two gay bishops in the US Church. The attention-getting debate is, as so sadly often, homosexuality. But a real difference is our polity.

We elect our bishop. It's America, *land of the free and home of the brave!* Gene Robinson and Mary Glasspool were elected according to our polity, confirmed by the wider American Church, and consecrated accordingly. Meritocracy and hierarchy operating hand in glove – not always smoothly, not always comfortably, but in this case in the cause of justice and to the greater glory of God. We fought a Revolution for this, honestly.

And in Britain, obviously the cradle of the Anglican Communion, bishops are appointed. It's hierarchy all the way, in a country where class is still a pathological preoccupation. They don't understand our system – how did these rogue priests – rogue only because of their open sexual orientation, get where they are? Why didn't we just refuse to consecrate them?

And our conservative bishops, some of them, however much they object to gay bishops, object more to having our polity dissed. Again, we fought a revolution for this!

Meritocracy and hierarchy operating hand in glove.

Because make no mistake, the Church is a hierarchy. Here at home, there are only a couple of things I may do that you may not. What are they? Only I may consecrate the elements, only I can turn the bread and wine into sacraments. And only I may pronounce absolution – and even that I do in the 'we' form, including myself, as I need to, in claiming God's forgiveness. Anything else – weddings, funerals, baptisms -all of these, under certain circumstances, can be celebrated by lay people.

I do have some other responsibilities by canon law. Only I can approve uses of the sanctuary, and I am supposed to run vestry meetings. In fact, I have run many vestry meetings over the years, but now I don't. I don't because we have been blessed for some years with wardens who run meetings very well, allowing me to take other roles in the meetings.

Which leads me to my final point. I have a number of gifts and talents. But so do each and every one of you. Many of you are better at many things than I will ever be and God has, I believe and hope, given me the wisdom to understand that.

When I was at the vocational conference CREDO a couple of months ago, the story I heard over and over from my colleagues was how overworked and stressed out they were, how their health and their marriages were suffering, how impossible it was to say no. In other words, how severely they were over-functioning.

It seems to be a pathology of the clergy to feel excessively responsible, and guilty if they can't do everything for everybody all the time and fix everything. I say *they*, because I feel blessedly free of that burden. I've always been clear that I can't do everything.

As I think back over my years here, as I do particularly when talking to newcomers, I realize that if I had suffered from that clergy virus of over-functioning, this place would have broken my heart. And it had broken too many, burnt out too many, before I came. So my discipline was to take things slowly, and be patient- well, try to be patient. And to stick around. To set down the rules when they needed to be rehearsed, to educate about why they were necessary, (that's the hierarchy part), and to identify and nourish the gifts of the laity (that's the meritocracy part)

I do none of this perfectly. But, by the grace of God and the accumulation of years, I'm better than I used to be, I pray. We're *all* better. And so, as a community, I believe we have come to possess a few more of the blessings that our lessons speak of today.

Prosperity- very relative, but still improved materially. And spiritually we prosper, I believe.

Appreciation of the wonderful works of God.

Understanding of the responsibilities of community.

And, most central, most critical, a measure of God's peace, that marvelous gift.

Alleluia ! Amen.

