

“Oaths and Allegiances”

July 16, 2006

Psalm 85:8-13

Mark 6:14-29

This morning, the sweat on my brow – and on a few other body parts – gives me an unnecessary reminder that this is summer. Summer, the time of year when kids of all ages find more time for swimming and bicycling, for gardening and maybe even reading just for fun. The time of year when the fruits of the earth arrive on our kitchen tables with such an abundance of color and flavor that even the most jaded among us can be moved to give thanks. *And* the time of year for a different pace and a different approach, even in church on a Sunday morning.

So today, I’d like to start by asking *you* to speak. I’d like you to take a few moments and think about the things that you’ve promised that you’d *never* do or that you’d *always* do. Things you’ve promised yourself or your family or your friends. These can be innocuous commitments, like agreeing with your grandmother that you would never wear red and purple together. Or very important things like promising always to tell the truth and swearing that you’d never yell at or hit your own child. Or promises that can literally be a matter of life and death, like swearing to yourself, as a child, that you’d never end up a drug addict or drunk like your mom or dad.

So ... frivolous or serious, minor or major, what are some of the promises you’ve made and oaths you’ve taken during your life?

What promises and oaths have you kept? Which have been the *hardest* to keep? What oaths and promises have you chosen *not* to keep? Has letting go of old allegiances been heartbreaking or freeing ... or both?

One reason I’ve been thinking lately about the commitments that shape our identities – the oaths and allegiances that define or confine us – is that I’m still growing into a new vocation, growing into the ordained minister that you and God have called me to be. And in trying to honor my new commitments to God, to you, and to myself, I’ve needed to rethink a few of my own promises – silly things like swearing I would never, ever, use a cell phone while out on a walk ... and more substantial things like swearing I’d never live in California again.

But I’ve also been thinking about oaths and allegiances the last few weeks, because the U.S. government is revisiting the question of whether it will embrace minimal standards of humane treatment for the people in its custody. So we are faced again with the questions, “What oaths and allegiances will bind us as a people, as a country? What is our bottom line, our deepest commitment? To hunt down and “neutralize” anyone we *suspect* might be a threat ... or to act in ways that are consistent with a commitment to due process, fairness, and basic decency?”

And, of course, I’ve been thinking about oaths and allegiances because of this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Mark, the gruesome story of John the Baptist’s

death. As Mark tells the story, Herod *liked* listening to John; he even *protected* John. But Herod also liked his daughter's dancing, and he swore that he would give her anything she asked. When she returned to him with her bloody request, he complied, ordering the execution of John the Baptist. Why? Why did Herod, the ruler of all of Judea, agree to this brutality, even though, according to Mark's Gospel, he was "deeply grieved" by his daughter's request? The text's answer to that question is simple. He had taken an oath to give her whatever she wanted, and, to keep his word and to save face with his guests, he had to follow through. Herod saved face, but John lost his life.

The story of Herod and John the Baptist is nearly 2000 years old. It comes to us in the New Testament through three different versions, in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is tempting – *I* am tempted – to dismiss this story as nothing more than an unreliable account of something that may or may not have happened long, long ago. I'm tempted to dismiss it in large part because I don't want to grapple with the questions I hear it asking, the questions I hear it asking of you and of me.

The questions are these. To what have we sworn our allegiance? What image of ourselves have we taken an oath to preserve? What path do we choose when our oaths and allegiances point us in one direction and a conflicting truth in our hearts points us in another?

Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann argues that our primary allegiance in this time and place is to a "therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our lives." It is "therapeutic" because it rests on the assumption that there is a product, treatment, or process to eliminate all of our aches, pains, discomfort, and trouble, so that we can live without inconvenience. It is "technological," because it rests on the assumption that everything – *everything* – can be fixed and made right through human ingenuity. It is "consumerist" because it rests on the assumption that the whole world and its resources are available to us, to be bought and sold without regard for our human and non-human neighbors. It is "militaristic" because our attempts to live out these assumptions need to be protected and maintained through power and threats.

Brueggemann's description of this primary allegiance reminded me of a billboard that appeared outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, when Chey and I were living there. It was an ad for a new development on the outskirts of the city. The billboard provided a few details of this gated community, but the most prominent words were the development's motto: "LIVE WITHOUT COMPROMISE!" Here was the false promise of living without inconvenience, based on the assumption that human design and engineering can provide heaven on earth. And *how* was this development going to provide life without the need to compromise? Through luxury and through separation from the life and problems of the rest of the city, separation, in other words, from *neighbor*. And all of it was to be protected not only with walls and gates, but with a private security force.

There are, of course, a number of problems with this approach to life and security. One of them is that there is no room in *this* vision of reality and the "good life" for *God's* vision of Shalom, brought to us this morning through the psalmist. God's vision for creation rests on love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace. It is a vision in which all of us come to see our need for one another, our need for the gifts of grace that God offers through each one of us. If we chase after the illusion of a life without pain or compromise or sacrifice, we lose our ability to hear Jesus when he says those simple

words, “Follow me,” and we lose our ability to discover the abundance of God’s grace and love. We become so wrapped up in our own efforts to create our lives that we close our hearts and minds to the life that God continues to create and longs for us to accept.

But it’s not just our cultural and national allegiances that prevent us from receiving God’s gift of life and grace. We also hold on to our personal and familial oaths and allegiances, even when they are figuratively or literally killing us. We maintain family secrets. We maintain a sharp dividing line between “us” and “them,” with the dividing line based on politics, religion, race, sexual orientation, or even the kinds of cars “we” and “they” drive. Or we develop an allegiance to a sense of powerlessness or despair in the face of pain and injustice in our own lives and around the world.

These allegiances can run – and ruin – our lives. But we don’t have to follow Herod’s example. We can do what he failed to do; we can reconsider our oaths and allegiances. And when we find that they prevent us from receiving the fullness and freedom that God is constantly offering us, we can renounce those oaths and allegiances. We can lose face ... and gain life.

A number of years ago, I read the story of a graduate student named George,¹ and I’ve remembered it ever since. George was a committed Buddhist and had engaged in Buddhist study and practice for ten years. He understood the very heart of his spiritual path to be non-judgment and noninterference. He tried to practice these principles with his roommate Michael, even after Michael had begun using cocaine to the point of addiction. One evening, George brought home a young woman who was very important to him, and when he opened the apartment door he saw Michael, undressed and dazed. He was lying on the floor covered by his own vomit. Despite his commitment to non-judgment and noninterference, George, in his own words, “lost it.” He picked Michael up and pushed him into the shower. Standing there getting soaked himself, George shoved Michael against the shower wall and shouted the most terrible things at him. He then gave Michael an ultimatum, clean up or get out, because it was too painful for George to watch Michael destroy himself. At that point, George changed his clothes and left his apartment to spend the night elsewhere.

The next morning, George was disheartened and deeply disappointed with himself. Despite 10 years of Buddhist practice, he had failed to be the compassionate friend and roommate he thought he should have been. He returned to the apartment, dreading what he assumed would be his next battle with Michael. But instead of a confrontation with an angry and strung-out roommate, George encountered a *grateful* Michael, who asked George for help. Michael explained that, until George had “lost it,” and told him he wouldn’t watch Michael destroy himself, Michael had never known that anyone cared what he did with his life. In what George thought of as his *failure* of compassion, Michael had encountered the love and compassion of someone who would not sit passively, watching Michael destroying himself.

On that evening, George’s commitment to be impassive and nonjudgmental in the presence of anything came face to face, quite literally, with raw human need. His love and horror melted his allegiance to a particular self image, a particular way of handling what lay before him on his living room floor. His oath to be impassive, no matter what, was in conflict with the anguish and anger in his heart ... and he followed his heart.

¹ In Rachel Naomi Remen’s *Kitchen Table Wisdom*.

Like Herod, like George, like our sisters and brothers throughout history, we encounter deep human needs that call us to question our oaths and allegiances. We may encounter those needs in the face of someone from the other side of the world. We may encounter those needs in the face of a friend across the street, across the sanctuary aisle, or across the kitchen table. And we may encounter those needs in the face we see in the mirror every morning. Wherever and whenever we come face to face with suffering or longing that calls us to *question* our oaths and allegiances, may we have the courage to embrace that question. May we have the wisdom to choose the path that leads toward Shalom, where steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, where righteousness and peace will kiss each other. The God who has written the truth on our hearts is ready to show the way.

Amen.

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