

“A Higher Law” / John 2:13-22 / 11 March 2012

Look at Jesus attacking the sacred cows of his day. Is it any wonder he made people mad, upsetting tables? Is it any wonder he got himself killed, breaking furniture in the temple, doing violence to the sacred symbols of his own faith, his own nation? Is it any wonder Jesus’ way led him to a cross? Is it any wonder that ours usually does not?

Let me tell you the curious-but-true story of a woman we’ll call Myrtle. Myrtle was a patriot, to be sure. Of course, her name wasn’t really “Myrtle,” but it was close. It was one of those “M” names that parents gave to girls born in the 1920s, and though she is long since dead, my legal counsel has advised me not to use her real name. Myrtle was a patriot. She also happened to be the grand matriarch of one tiny church out among the farms of Crawford County. Myrtle was in her eighties, wiry and thin, spry and sharp as a ginsu knife. And, much like a ginsu, she could slice a person julienne, just like a celery stick. She had a gentle side, and she was a sensitive woman. Her rheumy old eyes filled with tears at any hint of human suffering. But Myrtle’s default facial expression—the look that she wore when she didn’t know that anyone was watching her—it was a look of suspicion, guardedness, distrust. And she ran her little church as efficiently and as...unadventurously as she knew how. In a little country church where pastors came and went like the weather, Myrtle was the one who kept things together. She had been since the late 1950s. And Myrtle was a patriot.

When I arrived at this little church as a student pastor, before being ordained, Myrtle sweetly, firmly let me know where I stood. And just where did I stand? Well, I stood two rungs beneath her, with a possibility for advancement, as long as I did as Myrtle wished. On the rung between Myrtle and myself, just above me and just below her, stood everyone else in the congregation. In fact, the only people on a rung lower than mine were the couple whose baby Myrtle would not let us baptize, because their marriage was only “common law.” It was a tightly structured environment, but it wasn’t tense or unpleasant. In fact, there was a lot of love there. They were just a small church, and they knew that if they were going to survive, they couldn’t count on any pastor spending decades with them. No pastor could afford to live off the pittance they paid. Any pastor they got was either on his way up the career ladder or else on his way back down. So in terms of leadership, they had to count on a strong matriarch: Myrtle.

I’d only been preaching at this little church for a few weeks when one day during worship, just after the sermon, Myrtle stood up to say, “There’s a holiday coming up. Let’s all stand and say the pledge of allegiance.” Much to my surprise, the two youngest women in the church—both in their late fifties—marched up to the flag; one held the flagpole while the other spread the flag out to full view. They had clearly knew the routine; they were that church’s idea of a youth group. And all thirty people in the congregation stood and said the pledge of allegiance. After the service, Myrtle informed me, “We always say the pledge on the Sunday closest to a civil holiday: Veterans’ Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Presidents’ Day.” (Curiously, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was not on Myrtle’s short list of patriotic holidays.)

The pledge is a fine thing. I’m devoted to the notion of “liberty and justice for all”—as long as we live up to it. If I have any complaints about the pledge, it’s that the word “indivisible” hardly seems to describe the America that you and I know today, for we are a nation divided. But just as every church needs a set of shared sung or spoken traditions, like the Lord’s Prayer and the Doxology, every nation needs a set of

memorized rituals in order to pass along its collective identity. The pledge is part of how we do that.

And yet, I'd never before seen anyone say the pledge of allegiance...in church, during worship. And I wasn't sure about the way it was handled: Myrtle standing up in the middle of the service, right before the Apostles' Creed, and taking it on herself to insert the pledge, then those two other women jumping to their feet and rushing up to the flagpole. I felt a little undermined. But I knew that another civic holiday would roll around soon enough, and so I had several months to devise a plan.

In the summertime, we got even more informal in worship services at that little church. I didn't even plan the hymns before worship; in the summer, I simply let them call out the page number of any song they wanted to sing. Inevitably, they wanted to sing "In the Garden" or "How Great Thou Art" or "What A Friend We Have in Jesus," songs that I never programmed into the bulletin during the colder months. And so, one July Sunday, just before Independence Day, I came to church prepared for "In the Garden" and the pledge of allegiance. At that little church, the announcements came first, even came before the musical prelude. So I hatched a plan for dealing with the pledge of allegiance in church. When I stood up to make the announcements, I said, "It's this congregation's tradition to say the pledge of allegiance on Sundays that fall near a national holiday, so let's stand now and say the pledge *before* our worship begins." I went on to explain, "The pledge is an expression of our love of country; it's not an expression of our love of God, and so it doesn't really belong in the worship service proper, since our worship is directed toward God alone." Oh, I was proud of that clever little compromise. I just thought I was the trickiest, cleverest seminary student ever to get landed in a country church in Crawford County.

Myrtle did not agree. She did not think I was clever. Nothing stirred old Myrtle's soul quite so deeply as Jesus and Old Glory; she loved them both with all her heart, and she did not like being told—in her own church—that there was any real difference between the two, that church worship is for God alone, and reverence is for country. Not in her church! She stood with the others to say the pledge, glowering at me from across the room. And when the pledge was finished I smugly asked, "Okay, let our worship begin. What song do we want to sing as our opening hymn?" Old Myrtle had an answer as quick as a reflex. "Number 688!" Which, in that old nondenominational hymnal, was none other than "The Star-Spangled Banner." And as we all sang, "Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light," Myrtle grinned victoriously, and pretended to be looking at something out the window. And I couldn't help giggling at Myrtle's sly triumph. It was almost worth it to see her usually-anxious face transformed into a bright smirk. I chuckled all through the song, giggled like a child as we stood there in church and, instead of saying the pledge of allegiance, we sang the National Anthem.

Myrtle died of cancer not two years after that July Sunday. I regained her favor one wintry day by driving through an ice storm from Crawford County to Montefiore Hospital, in Oakland, showing up unexpectedly at her bedside just an hour before they wheeled her into the operating room. I still have one of Myrtle's African violets that she parceled out to church members when she realized that she was going to die.

Myrtle was faithful and hard working; she held things together for many years in a little church where no minister ever stayed—myself included. But like most of us, she had blind spots. Her rule of life was "God and country." She resented being told that

there was any difference between the two. But she was no worse than most of us. We develop attachments early in life, and those attachments calcify into non-negotiable beliefs, and those beliefs become the banners under which we live. What is so dear to your heart that you'd be tempted to crucify anyone who seems to disrespect it? Just think of the several non-negotiable commitments that guide your life and mine—our private attachments to family, to country, to wealth, to prestige, to education, to faith—and most of those commitments find ultimate expression in a precious symbol—in the same way that the pledge was a symbol of something far bigger for Myrtle. What are the symbols in your life, and what attachments do they represent? The immaculate lawns, the crowded bookshelves, the trophies, or diplomas, the framed photographs of adult children...all the many symbols! What are your symbols, and what do they tell the world about your life's greatest attachments?

The temple in Jerusalem was a powerful symbol for an oppressed people. It was a reminder that once—long, long ago, when they were a band of slaves—God promised them a kingdom, a special place in the history of the world, a land of their own. And now that those promises all seemed to have been broken, that symbol—the temple—meant more to them than ever. Foreigners had overrun their kingdom, reducing it to a minor colony. They were second-class citizens in their own homeland. Their own political and religious leaders were getting rich by selling out to the Roman occupiers. It would be like squatters moving into your house, while you still lived there, and forcing you to live by their rules. It was infuriating, and frustrating, and dehumanizing. The one thing they still had was that beautiful temple in Jerusalem—a symbol of God's ancient promises, a symbol of national identity, a rare reminder that they mattered.

Oh, why did Jesus have to strike a blow against that precious symbol? The powerful already hated him for stirring up the people, for questioning their authority, but they probably would not have crucified him if he hadn't lifted up his heel, quite literally, against that great Jerusalem temple. Of course, it's inappropriate behavior to go into any public building and overturn tables, throw the money on the floor, and chase people out with a whip. It's especially inappropriate in church. But Jesus wasn't just ransacking any old church. He was ransacking the Jerusalem temple—the greatest, last bastion of his own people's sense of dignity, identity, worth. What's with this wild-eyed, angry Jesus? Why is he kicking his own people when they're down? Jesus unhinged, Jesus unglued, blind with rage, rampaging through the temple. You can hear the yelling, the surprise, the coins clattering to the floor, rolling across the tiles as he jettisons the cash drawers. The birds squawk their objections as this other Jesus breaks open the cages where the sacrificial doves and pigeons are kept.

Well, I'll admit to you, I'm not sure what Jesus was up to in the temple that day. Maybe he hated the ritual of animal sacrifice as much as all the prophets before him hated it—and they did! Maybe he was acting out the destruction of the temple by the Romans, which took place exactly fifty years later. Maybe he meant to prophecy the destruction of his own body on the cross. Maybe he was *trying* to get himself killed! I don't know why Jesus came so unglued in the temple that day, but my guess is that he was mostly just mad at our silly attachments, our meaningless commitments, and their empty symbols.

And so, I ask again, what firm commitments do you nurture, what attachments? And what things—literal *things*—in your life have come to represent those deep commitments? The people whose tables Jesus overturned, whose birdcages Jesus

shattered, they weren't bad people. This God-stuff is tricky business, and they were just going about it the best they knew how. But, much like Myrtle, they were making a god in their own image, a god who loved all the things they loved, a god who confirmed their commitments. They were making a god who demanded blood in order to forgive human faults, a vengeful god who would rather see a poor pigeon catch hell than to let a human trespass go unpunished. You might say that one of their greatest commitments was to the idea that, in a safe world, guilt had to be punished, met with violence.

This is the sad thing about religion; it's been happening for millennia, and it's happening still today. The religious impulse in humankind is universal. It begins with some deeply moving moment of awe, or wonder, or inexplicable calm. Religion begins when something from outside of us grips our human spirits, and we're profoundly touched by something beautiful, or true, or good. And that brush with better things makes us aspire to better things, to beauty, or truth, or goodness. It's a joyful way to live, in a quest for beauty, truth, and goodness. But it's hard, too. And so, over time we begin to settle for substitutes: rules, and dogmas, and rituals—some of which started out as aids to faith. Or worse, we begin to believe that *all* of our attachments and commitments are holy things, and in fashioning our systems to approach God, we end up remaking a god in our own image. Just look at the god that so many of our politicians are carrying around in their shirt pockets! The intolerant, hate-filled, flag-waving god who whispers a benediction over injustice as long as it suits the purposes of the person whose god it is. Throughout the New Testament, you find Jesus locked in conflict with people who abandoned their quest for the beautiful, the true, and the good in order to settle for a petty, coercive bean-counter of a god who looked pretty much like them.

People have always, always enlisted God for their team. The Russian Czars did it. All the murderous dynasties of old Europe did it, the Borgias, the Hapsburgs, the Medicis, the Bourbons. Terrorists do it, as do our shadiest politicians. The Nazis did it. You know, it's become very popular to play the Adolph Hitler card with those whose views differ from your own. I recently saw a photo of the political comedian Jon Stewart holding up a sign that read, "I disagree with you, but I'm pretty sure you're not Hitler."

Type the name "Joseph" into your Google search engine these days, and the first suggestion that pops up is "Joseph Kony." That's because there's a movement afoot to make this obscure man famous—or infamous. Joseph Kony is the leader of "The Lord's Resistance Army," a band of Ugandan guerrillas that's been terrorizing central Africa for 26 years. Uganda has produced several especially gruesome fellows who murdered their own people while the world turned a blind eye—like the forgotten Idi Amin. The Lord's Resistance Army is famous for kidnapping children, forcing them to shoot their own parents, and taking them into the jungle to serve as soldiers. Kony claims that everything he does is for the glory of God. He's building an Africa based on the 10 Commandments that we just read. He's slaying the wicked in order to establish a holy reign.

Maybe that's what made Jesus so angry in the temple that day: the quest for beauty, and truth, and goodness had been swallowed up by a petty, homemade god of personal interests, buying and selling, and killing animals to atone for sin. The religion of Jesus' day said, "Fear God," but Jesus' own personal faith said, "Love God." For if yours is a God to be feared, then you'll treat people with suspicion. But if yours is a God to be loved, then you'll treat people with respect and kindness. This is the higher law that all those commandments come down to: Love God and love each other. Amen.