

Sermon for 4 July 2010  
Pentecost 6; Proper 9, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

It being Independence Day, I'm reminded of an exchange I witnessed back when I was in college. Colgate hosted a lecture by the noted pacifist theologian Stanley Hauerwas, and after his talk there was a panel discussion featuring members of the faculty. One of the panelists was a political scientist who questioned Hauerwas quite appropriately, I thought, about the speaker's apparent rejection of patriotism. "Should I not be permitted to be proud of my country?" the professor asked. The speaker, in his thick Texas accent (which struck my Yankee classmates as somehow at odds with his politics) replied "you know as well as I do, that pride is a sin, and it will send you straight to hell."

Now, I would disagree with Hauerwas' myopic denunciation of patriotism. I personally agreed with the professor who saw being "proud of his country" as a positive thing. Even so, Hauerwas was on to something about the destructive nature of pride. It is one thing to be proud of one's country when such patriotism is still objective enough to see that she may have some faults. It is quite another to engage in unreflective nationalism, to see being American as somehow making one a better person than one who happened to be born in another land.

The same can be said with regard to religion, as this morning's Epistle and Gospel point out. It is one thing to be a faithful Christian; it is quite another to be inordinately proud of one's own faithfulness. One of the great occupational hazards of being a Christian is self-satisfaction. It is a hazard rife with irony. So many Christians can become so self-satisfied precisely because they are

doing what they ought: reading the bible regularly, going to church, evangelizing, helping the poor and needy, &c.

The seventy men whom Jesus sent to evangelize the areas to which he himself would later travel got dangerously close to such pride:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name." And he said to them..  
"Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you. *Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*"

The seventy had most certainly done great things for the sake of the Kingdom, and they were understandably proud of their efforts, and Jesus throws a bit of a damp rag on their pride. It's as if he's saying "don't get too cocky. I've given you power, but it's mine, not yours, and your joy should be based not on your own good works, but on the fact that you are mine."

St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Galatians, puts it even more bluntly: "If anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself." Indeed, it is ultimately not we ourselves who effect the work of the Gospel, but Christ who is in us. Thus, as Paul says elsewhere, if we boast let it not be of ourselves but of Christ.

But too often we do take great pride in our efforts and merely coat that pride in a patina of false humility. There has always been a danger in the Church of spiritual elitism. Said danger may be more evident in other corners of Christianity than our own, where having exactly the right kind of conversion experience or some particular spiritual gift or another can serve to separate the righteous from the reprobate. Even so, we are not immune to such pride. It is easy to get awfully chuffed because we're especially faithful at prayer, or give sacrificially to the church, or donate our time and talents to some ministry or another. Like

I said earlier, the great irony is that pride can rear its ugly head precisely because we're doing what we ought to do. Thus, it is not actions but a spirit, the spirit of humility, real humility, which separates the saint from the Pharisee.

As difficult as this is, it's remarkably liberating. We must make every effort to do God's work, but when we fail not all is lost. When we place our joy and hope upon the foundation of God's grace rather than our efforts we cannot suffer discouragement for too long when our plans don't succeed.

Do you ever wonder why, in the first part of Gospel reading, Jesus advises the seventy to shake the dust off their feet if their message is not received someplace? I don't think it's to give offence to the rejecters, but to give hope to the rejected. It's a reminder that failure happens, but that what we do isn't so terribly important that the Kingdom will fall because we've failed. The

seventy evangelists were counseled to accept the failure and move on, and that's good advice for all of us. In fact, some bumps on the road, some times when we ourselves need to shake the dust off our feet, can be quite edifying, not just because we learn from our failures how to do better, but because we learn from our failures that it's not all about us, and God's plan will proceed apace regardless. One of my favorite prayers in the BCP is a rather lengthy prayer of thanksgiving (it's the one on page 836 if you want to look at it later), and one of the things it has us thanking God for are "those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on [Him] alone." Failures save us from the kind of pride that we experience when we look in the mirror and think we see the model of sainthood. Unless we're delusional, any of us can point to a failure or two or a dozen that have helped keep us from being too haughty. So, don't be afraid to fail big time.

It'll probably happen in some aspect of our Christian life at some point, and if we've not put all our stock in our own inherent saintliness, we'll be able to survive. We'll be able to kick the dust off our feet and go to whatever task God has for us next with more humility and grace than before.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.