

McCabe United Methodist Church

January 10, 2010

1 Peter 1:13-21

“I Pledge Allegiance...”

Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning is from First Peter, and I'm going to read from Chapter 1, verses 13-21. The section is titled “Chosen to Live a Holy Life.”

Be alert and think straight. Put all your hope in how kind God will be to you when Jesus appears. Behave like obedient children and don't let your lives be controlled by your desires as they used to be. Always live as God's holy people should, because God is the one who chose you and he is holy. That's why the scripture says 'I am the holy God' and you must be holy too. You say that God is your father, but God doesn't have favorites. He judges all of us by what we do so you must honor God while you live as strangers here on earth. You are rescued from the useless way of life that you learned from your ancestors. But you know that you are not rescued by such things as silver or gold that don't last. No, you were rescued by the precious blood by Christ, that spotless and innocent lamb. Christ was chosen even before the world was created but because of you he did not come until these last days. When he did come, it was to lead you to have faith in God who raised Jesus from the dead and honored him in a glorious way. That is why you have put your faith and hope in God.”

The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God!

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. That is how we started every class, at least while I was in elementary school. We weren't nearly as patriotic in middle school or high school, but also used that at Boy Scout meetings. It had been a long time since I had said the pledge but this year my boys have started Scouts as well and that's the Color Guard, and the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance is how we start every meeting there now. So, I have had opportunity to dust off what I knew so well as a child. I learned something recently about the Pledge of Allegiance that really struck me as to how much I have taken for granted, the pledge that I was giving.

That one word, allegiance, is a lot bigger deal than I ever imagined. Going back in history a few hundred years, in the countries, particularly of Europe, there was this idea or this obligation placed on those born in those countries to pledge their allegiance to their monarch, to their lord and to those who had authority and rule over them and to their country and their government. It was an obligation that every citizen had to take upon themselves and they could not change that allegiance unless they had written permission from their lord or their sovereign or their country. So a citizen of France couldn't just cross the British Isle and become a citizen of Britain because they wanted to. They actually had a note from the king giving them permission to pledge allegiance to a new country, to change their citizenship. Now, we kind of go “Sheesh, what's the big deal?” but it was a huge deal. For those of us born in this country we take for granted the process of citizenship. I suppose there is some of that that still goes on, but in the United States you can have a dual citizenship. In most countries today you can be a citizen of the United States and Congo, or

France, or wherever. So, we don't have a problem with that idea but it was a new idea when the United States was being formed. It was an idea that we kind of ushered in.

Let me give you a little bit of the history. In July of 1868, the US Congress declared that in the preamble to the Expatriation Act (let me read to you what they put in that preamble). They wrote "The right of expatriation is a natural and inherent right of all people, indispensable to the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and of the fundamental principals of this government, the United States. Every natural-born citizen of a foreign state who is also an American citizen, and every natural-born American citizen who is also a citizen of a foreign land, owes a double allegiance, one to the United States and one to their homeland. If these allegiances come into conflict, he or she may be guilty of treason against one or both. If the demands of those two sovereigns upon their duty of allegiance come into conflict, those of the United States have the paramount authority in American law. Likewise, those of the foreign land have paramount authority in their legal system. In such a situation it is incumbent on the individual to renounce their citizenship of one of these countries to avoid the possibility of being forced into a situation where conflicting duties are required of them." Well, they did know how to phrase things, didn't they? I'm not so sure how clear that is, but it sounds good.

Well this whole idea of expatriation, of pledging our allegiance to one country or another, and having the right to choose that, wasn't always a right and how we take that pledge of allegiance for granted. Well, there is some of this expatriation going on in this passage that Peter writes because Peter is asking his listeners to make sure where their loyalties lie. All of this really comes through two particular words in this whole passage so I'm not going to get very far on this whole paragraph, but really it just comes down to two words or two phrases. The first is the second sentence, Peter says "Put all your hope in how kind God will be to you when Jesus Christ appears." That's a fair translation; although I think they have the word order a little bit off. I'm not just making this up, there are other commentators and scholars who think likewise, that it's not about the quality or quantity of hope that we place in Christ; although that does come in, in other scriptures and passages, but the way the scripture is in Greek it really has this idea, not of the quantity or quality of our faith or hope, but the object of it. So what Peter is really saying is, don't divide your loyalty. Place all of your faith, all of your hope, all of your trust in Jesus Christ, and nothing else. What really drives it home, just a couple verses later, Peter says "Don't let your lives be controlled by your desires as they used to be."

There is a Greek word in there that takes a whole phrase in English to translate and it still doesn't come across very well. It's this "your desires as they used to be" is all one Greek word and it carries with it this idea, yes desires in the sense of the things our bodies need to make physical life possible, and the things that we desire to make physical life comfortable. So it has with it that idea of flesh that Paul uses when he goes there, but it has a much larger picture and a much more challenging context because it doesn't just stop there. This life as it used to be goes all the way out to our country, of the rules and laws and the order that govern our lives. To the rules and the structure that make up our communities and our homes, our families, and all of the relationships that make life worth living. Basically everything that we can think of in terms of our earthly life here and now is included in this "life as it used to be." That's where it gets really challenging

because Peter is saying, don't mix your loyalties, don't mix your faith or your trust. Put it all in Christ and only in Christ. That's what it means to be holy.

So it's not just a matter of avoiding things that are bad and that we know better, but still do sometimes occasionally, anyway; hopefully not, but you get the idea. It's not just avoiding the things that we know better, but it's not mixing our loyalties when it comes down to things that are good, some things that are very good. To get personal, or to put that in context, it's possible to have a relationship with your spouse that is a division of your loyalties. It's possible to have a relationship with your children or a friend or your country or your employer that is a division of those loyalties, of that faith, of that trust. That's a challenging word. Because we do put trust, we do put faith in people. An illustration from our Sunday school class this morning, if you're on an airplane you're putting your trust in the pilot; you are trusting that he knows, that she knows, what she is doing, so that you will get to the other end alive, landing on the runway and without a big ordeal involved.

There are all sorts of times and places and situations where we put our trust in others and it could be as impersonal as the pilot who is flying the airplane or it could be as personal as your spouse or even as mundane as trusting in your 401K and your retirement plan to get you through.

So, what exactly does Peter mean by these? He is not saying that they are evil, he is not saying the physical world is to be avoided or we are to have as little to do with it as possible; because in just a couple of chapters he is going to go into great detail and great length about the relationship between husbands and wives and parents and children and employers and employees, and those significant relationships that make our world and that govern who we are and how we live. So what Peter is really getting at is this whole idea of where is your loyalty? That everything we do and everything we are, everything we have, all the relationships in our lives, need to be a reflection of, first, foremost and principally our relationship with Christ and our relationship with God. So that the way I love my spouse is a reflection of my relationship with Christ. The way I love my children is a reflection of my relationship with Christ. The relationship to my employer and to the things that surround me in my life is a reflection of my relationship with Christ. Especially in the case of things, that they are a tool, an extension of who I am and how I serve Christ, rather than being an end in themselves. Because when things become an end, life falls apart and it just doesn't work very well. Things perish, they will pass away. They will disappoint us. They will break down. It is God alone who persists or who is eternal and he is that one foundation. Everything else needs to be built upon the trust that we have in Christ and our relationship with him so that all that we are, all that we have, is about Jesus Christ. That if our spouse disappoints us or our children disappoint us or our job disappoints us or the market disappoints us, we can be disappointed but it doesn't strike at the foundation of where our trust and faith lie. Because our trust is in God alone and not in those things, or the things of this world. Because those things pass away, people die, or people disappoint us, but it is Christ alone who will always be there, who will always be that sure foundation.

Easy to say, but kind of difficult to implement, because when it comes to loyalty we are all a bit of a mixed bag. A quick illustration. I was watching an episode of Survivor recently and was

appalled by the final results. It was the grand finale, and I didn't remember the guy's name, but Russell, who was kind of the huxter and the consummate player of the game. If you're not familiar with Survivor, it is a TV Show and it is basically the last man or woman standing wins a million dollars. They start out on this island and there is probably 20 of them and they are split into tribes. There are different challenges where people are eliminated and they can win immunity and there are all these different tasks that they do. About the last dozen or so of them who are voted out, all stick around and so they become the jury for who wins out of three people, who wins that title of who is the last person left. Well Russell played the game extremely well but he was mean, he was two-faced, he lied, he cheated, he made life miserable for his own tribe, for the other tribe, he was horrible. On one hand he played the game extremely well, but he was horrible. Well, the jury in the final end gave it to someone else because of course they were the ones being stabbed in the back by all of Russell's maneuverings and manipulation. So this other gal got it, but what really disturbed me is then Sprint had a deal where people could vote on their cell phone who they thought the winner should be and they got \$100,000 as consolation. Peanuts compared to the million that the winner got, but still you got the popular vote and the 100 grand. Guess who the Sprint cell phone vote went to? It went to Russell! I was appalled, I was disgusted! How in the world could anyone vote for this guy, this "the end justifies the means, it doesn't matter what I do to other people as long as I get my way, and looking out for number one" kind of guy and he won the popular vote? Blech! I don't know, maybe you voted for him, I should be quiet.

I don't think we are going to be nearly so crass or blatant with our display of worldliness but there is something of that quality or character that permeates our culture and thus has left its print on us. So, it's very easy for us to seek to do things our way, to divide our loyalties and place our trust in our own strength, or what we can do, what we can accomplish, what we can get out of someone else, rather than trusting God, trusting Christ. So in that context, in your bulletin (if it didn't fall out on the trip from the usher to your seat) there should be a card that on the top says Covenant Prayer, from John Wesley's Covenant Service, 1780. Well John Wesley borrowed this covenant service from someone else, but it became a practice among his Methodists. Every year in London, which is where he lived, on the first day of the year they would do the covenant service. This prayer is just one piece of the whole service, but it gives you a very good idea of what it's about. It is very challenging, but it strikes at the heart of this issue of divided loyalty. It's important because in the kingdom of God there is no expatriation. You cannot divide your loyalties, it is Christ or it's the world, and the two are at war. There will be a conflict of interest and we will, as the writers of the preamble said, will be guilty of high treason against one or both. So as an invitation, take this prayer home and read it carefully and ask yourself where are my loyalties divided? I'll close by reading part of this prayer.

Please pray with me "I am no longer my own but thine. Put me to what thou wilt and rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing. Put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full. Let me be empty. Let me be all things. Let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal." Amen.