

EVEN ON THE GENTILES

ACTS 10:44-48

Ah...this is one of those times in which Tuscaloosa takes a breath. Students have graduated or flunked out (or will soon). Classes have been interrupted, if only briefly, and fingers walk toward that reset button that will be pressed in the summer or the fall.

I understand that everybody here is not a student or a professor, but it is difficult for me to imagine the ebb and flow of anybody's life in Tuscaloosa not being affected by the rhythm of somebody's academic calendar (and maybe more than one).

Soon and very soon, patriotism in this nation will begin to swell. It starts with Memorial Day when we look into the faces of those who are otherwise forgotten as "casualties of war." Then, on the 4th of July, we celebrate freedom. From whom or for what, I fear that we forget, and yet, we, as a nation, seem to agree: whatever freedom is, it should be celebrated, and thus we do with feasts and fireworks and unexpected trips to emergency rooms.

Being an American is almost as mysterious as being a Christian. The possibilities seem endless, the experience so extraordinary, that they defy explanation, and yet because we are Christians and Americans, that does not stop us from trying.

That phrase "Christian and American" has found its way into the marrow of my bones, in part because it is central to one of John Updike's novels, on which I wrote a dissertation years ago. The novel is *A Month of Sundays*, which is the story of Thomas Marshfield, a minister who has been banished from the church he had been serving for a series of indiscretions.

The novel begins with an apology: "Forgive me my denomination and my town; I am a Christian minister, and an American. I write these pages at some point in the time of Richard Nixon's unraveling." Christian and American: Everybody knows what that is, right?

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As the novel unfolds, it becomes clearer and clearer that Marshfield's unraveling coincides with Nixon's. In fact, in many of Updike's novels, the story is set in conversation with history, with the people, places and events that shape it and are shaped by it, especially the President. Since then, I have noticed that feelings of patriotism often are related to how one feels about the President, the administration's policies and the history being made during one's life and times.

What does patriotism look like? Is it about supporting troops or advocating war? Is it more patriotic to sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" or "Give Peace a Chance"? Or perhaps it is more important and appropriate to provide a thick description of American thought and practice or sing a collection of songs from a representative anthology?

The tougher question is, "How does faith inform our understanding of ourselves as Americans?" What stops us from protesting for the sake of protesting or embracing the status quo because it works well enough for us? America is beautiful. God's grace has been shed on thee.

Is it possible to speak of one nation under God indivisible with liberty and justice for all with a straight face? Does the church of Jesus Christ act any less divided? Is it any more unified, liberated or just? Only God knows, and God seems willing to take only so much before the Spirit intervenes.

Somewhere between Easter and Pentecost, we find ourselves in Acts where the Spirit interrupts consistently. While Peter is still speaking, the Spirit interrupts. Peter speaks early and often throughout the history of the early church, and the Spirit falls upon all who hear the word, and that's *the* word, as opposed to *a* word, which explains some of the divisions in the church. One person's angel is another person's demon, and each is sure that the other has been visited by a spirit from another world!

When the Spirit falls, the "circumcised believers" are astonished that this gift is being poured out on the Gentiles. Even now, human beings assume that God always blesses "us" and never "them."

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“We” entertain angels unaware while “they” entertain demons, and yet God’s Spirit is poured out even on the Gentiles.

On this Easter journey through Acts, it has become obvious to me that one function of this book is to construct and reconstruct the category of Gentile. Think about it. Throughout Scripture, “Gentile” often functions as a miscellaneous category meaning “non-Jew” or at least “non-Jewish male” (at least when the discussion is framed by “circumcision”). In Acts, the early church not only is grappling with the question, “Do Gentiles belong?” But also with the question, “Who, besides Greeks, belong to this category?” Ethiopians and eunuchs, for sure...

The short answer to this question is “whomever the Lord calls,” and the Lord proves to be creative in every sense of the term. God creates the earth and all that is in it. God becomes flesh and dwells among us in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit abides to support and sustain the church, even, and perhaps especially, when the flesh is weak.

How do we know that the Spirit is at work among the Gentiles? Because they are speaking in tongues and extolling God! How do we know that God is looking to engraft them into the body of Christ through the waters of baptism? Because they have received the Spirit!

Peter asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Who among them would raise a hand to the world suggesting, “No, this person and all whom this person’s experience represents do not belong.” Christians, who forget that the Spirit abides with us, say “no” from time to time, and Americans sometime celebrate freedom by denying it to others.

But the Spirit is always with us, watching and waiting, and the Spirit interrupts. Chandler School of Theology professor Luke Timothy Johnson makes much of the fact that the Spirit often is “poured out,” and I understand why. Somebody has to do the pouring, and this somebody is God. The language

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of “pouring out” suggests liquidity. The Spirit of God is more fluid than an economy based on instant gratification, and yet the Spirit falls abruptly on those whose world is contracting. The disciples’ world must have seemed smaller following Jesus’ ascension, and yet it isn’t until Jesus is ascended that they begin to consider the Spirit’s work among the Gentiles. God uses Christ’s absence to emphasize the Spirit’s presence in the church and the world and to blur the distinction between them.

The Spirit falls upon them like rain, of which we have had plenty lately. I don’t know about you, but I appreciate a gentle rain. I find the pitter-patter of raindrops outside the window comforting, and I am capable of enjoying being caught in the rain if there is not a torrential downfall. And yet, I have a problem with rain...

Rain interrupts. I may be stranded in a parking lot somewhere, because the trunk seemed like a good place for an umbrella at the time. I may be running behind, because softball games are not supposed to take six hours unless there are extra, extra innings.

When I was a grad student, I used to go to baseball games with my major professor (whom many of you met when I was installed as your pastor), and somewhere around the middle innings he would begin to wax eloquently about the game. “Baseball isn’t a metaphor for life,” he’d said (and I am confident that he is still saying this to some unsuspecting fan). “Life is a metaphor for baseball,” he’d proclaim, and I would offer him a pretzel. One of his points is that baseball exists not beyond space but beyond time. Extra innings being what they are, a game, like life itself, could go on forever.

I thought about this at yesterday’s NCAA Softball Regional and plan to call him and ask, “What about rain delays?” The Spirit interrupts. The NCAA puts together this big event designed to bring student-athletes together in the name of scholarship and sport, an act that, in my experience, does more to foster competition than a spirit of unity. Then the rains come with cracks of thunder and bolts of lightning, and everybody sits (or flees).

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The Tide faithful seem to have a way of entertaining themselves, and in so doing, the Spirit brings together Texas Longhorns, Chattanooga Moccasins and Mississippi Valley State Delta Devilettes (that's not "Deviled Eggs" as I first thought). At yesterday's game, one Tide fan in particular ran up and down the stands cheering and dancing, helping those in attendance to laugh through the rain delay. The defining moment for me was when she cajoled this Texas fan to choreograph a dance with her. For the length of this dance, there was neither Tide nor Longhorn nor Moc nor Devilette. Granted, the behavior was strange, like speaking in tongues and extolling God, but there was rain, and there was dancing.

Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? Not Christians. Not Americans. Rather than worrying about who is "in" and who is "out" or being grumpy about the rain, why not give thanks? Give thanks for rain. Give thanks for the patience and perspective that delays instill. Just as Peter orders the church to baptize Gentiles into the body and then invites them to stay for several days, let us strive to be more welcoming. Let us work with the Spirit rather than frustrate ourselves by working against it by celebrating the categories through which God creates and recreates. Let us celebrate that God's Spirit is being poured out even on the Gentiles, and let us count ourselves among them and dance together now and forever. To the God of all grace who calls us to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever. Amen.

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