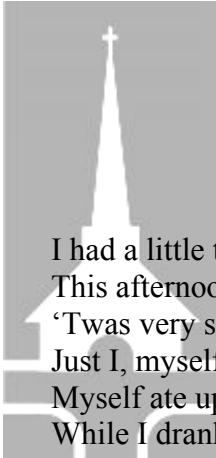


The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



Our Little Tea Party – The Communitarian Challenge¹

Genesis 12.1-3; Luke 12.48b

Russ Dean, October 9, 2005

I had a little tea party
This afternoon at three,
'Twas very small, three guests in all –
Just I, myself, and me.
Myself ate up the sandwiches,
While I drank up the tea,
'Twas also I who ate the pie
And passed the cake to me.²

On March 13, 1963, Ernesto Miranda stole \$8.00 from a Phoenix, Arizona bank worker. In custody by local police, and interrogated alone for more than two hours, Miranda eventually confessed not only to the theft, but also to an unsolved murder. This interrogation and Miranda's confession was challenged, later, and in a landmark case by the U.S. Supreme Court Miranda was granted a new trial. Miranda also won a place in history, for every person growing up in America subsequent to *Miranda v. Arizona*, and after a few episodes of "Dragnet" or "Law and Order," can recite their own Miranda Rights: "I have the right to remain silent. Everything I say can and will be used against me in a court of law. I have the right to an attorney... I have the right..."³

¹ A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and I may well have proven this today! I can only claim to know enough about "communitarianism" as a discipline to be truly dangerous. I have known and used the word informally for some time, before even realizing there was a specific discipline or political movement as such. I am indebted to my friend, Ken Godwin, for recommending two books, which I skimmed in preparing this sermon: *Rights and the Common Good: The Communitarian Perspective*, by Amitai Etzioni, and *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse*, by Mary Ann Glendon.

² I learned this poem in kindergarten and do not know the author.

³ I took this information from: <http://usgovinfo.about.com/cs/mirandarights/>.

There is no more heated argument being conducted in this country today that that of “rights talk.” What are my rights? The conversation has become so poisoned and contentious that the language of rights shows up everywhere, and so loudly that we often lose perspective on the real issue at hand. In her book, *Rights Talk*, Mary Ann Glendon says, “a tendency to frame nearly every social controversy in terms of a clash of rights... impedes compromise, mutual understanding, and the discovery of common ground.”⁴ This nation which cut its teeth on the freeing quest for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and pulled itself up by the bootstraps of a Bill of Rights, which is unique among the nations of the earth, has turned so individually and so inwardly in our climb to success, that I fear the very rights which gave us our unprecedented freedom, now threaten to undo us.

What are my rights?

An almost-universal corollary to the claim of individual rights is the accusation of an “entitlement mentality” in everyone else. The recent devastation in Louisiana has brought a new dialogue (or, more accurately, competing monologues) concerning rights and race and responsibility.⁵ Who is responsible for the extreme poverty that Katrina’s winds exposed? In this great land of great freedom, and in this era, bathed in the language of personal rights, it is all too easy to blame the victims themselves. In the days following the storm, even as we watched the tormented cries of the poor and the elderly and the helpless children sweltering in the heat and hopelessness of New Orleans’ superdome, Amy and I listened, with bewildered ears, to one who poured salt into those already

⁴ Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk*, p.xi, emphasis added.

⁵ The subtitle of Glendon’s book is, “The Impoverishment of Political Discourse,” and it only takes a few minutes, listening to television talk or the poisoned airwaves, to know that our nation is so polarized that we scarcely know how to say “hello” to persons across the aisle. We must learn to dialogue.

gaping wounds: “You cannot tell me that those people couldn’t have gotten out if they had really wanted to?” (How? And to go where?) “And all they want now is just another handout!”⁶

If individual rights and individual responsibility is all there is, then this bitter critique of our nation’s poorest and most helpless is probably on target. They’ll have to fend for themselves – or suffer the consequences. But the life of Christ tells us that there is more to life than what is mine. And, that I am responsible in life for more than just myself.

I do not deny that our system of welfare has created a sense of dependency, and that we need a better way to encourage responsible self-sufficiency. But, we must not blame the victims for the results of a system not of their own making. And, a little humility and a dose of reality would do the rest of us a lot of good – for we, too, are beneficiaries of entitlement policies. Ira Katznelson of Columbia University cites what he calls “affirmative action for whites” in government policies following the Second World War, which largely served to create our current middle class. According to Katznelson’s research, 3,229 loans were offered in Mississippi in 1947 on the GI Bill. How many of these loans, providing a new start for farmers and businesses do you think were offered to black veterans living in Mississippi 1947? Two.⁷

⁶ I do believe that some of “those people” could have gotten out. And that some of “those people” were in fact products of a welfare system which had made them dependent. My objection to this response was primarily in the level of invective which he spewed upon these people. Where is our humility? Where is our compassion – even for people who make very poor choices? Did they really not deserve better than this – even if poor choice (or a lifetime of poor choices) led to their circumstances? I cannot imagine Jesus responding in such a way.

⁷ This article, “Affirmative Action for Whites” appeared in the Charlotte Observer within the last two weeks (though I clipped the article without preserving the date.) I have no doubt that some will question Katznelson’s statistics, or interpret them in such a way as to justify their results. (A recent article in the Observer which identified a (racist) pattern of charging higher mortgage rates to African American applicants was quickly denounced as non-racist by those who saw the decision for rate determinations as

I do not intend to stir up trouble for myself, nor to confuse the basic message of today's sermon, with contentious politics. (Though the gospel is always political and following Jesus will always make us contentious!) I only ask you to consider, before casting stones on the poor and the dispossessed, the ways in which we all have been beneficiaries to more than is our basic "right." I believe all Americans have an entitlement mentality that we twist in our favor.

The great, tragic irony of this mentality, of our incessant demand for what is "mine," is that we lose sight of the only right we truly possess. We may learn, in listening to Jesus, that some of our so-called "rights" are just plain wrong – for the only right we inherently possess is the right to be human. And that right, that gift of life we have been granted, regardless of our birth or our financial worth, does not come to us with any intrinsic guarantee to individual freedoms. For as T.S. Eliot put it:

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.

The entitlement mentality of a "me generation," both affluent and poor, has made life about serving up our own little tea parties, even when the world around goes hungry.

Parker Palmer writes:

"Most of us fear community because we think it will call us away from ourselves... [But] What a curious conception of self we have! We have forgotten that self is a moving intersection of many other selves. We are formed by the lives which intersect ours.

made solely on the math of credit ratings, i.e., if blacks were charged higher rates, it is not because banks or banking policies are racist, but because the credit ratings of blacks applying for loans is inferior to their white counterparts.) It does seem to me that we have a way of reading our biases into statistics, of making them say what we want them to say. Any productive conversation about rights and responsibilities will call for a considerable amount of honesty – even the willingness to see the "*log in our own eye*," before we try to take the speck out of our neighbor's eye (Matthew 7.3).

The story of the call of Abram is formative for Judaism and Christianity. As I read it, the story forms the basis for a communitarian (read: community) challenge to the tea party mentality of a me generation. Read exclusively, Abram's call will perhaps speak of a God who plays favorites, choosing only some, but read against the backdrop of God's universal creation, and God's pronouncements of all things good (Genesis 1), and read through the retrospective lens of the universal inclusion of Jesus Christ, Abram becomes a metaphor for every person. God comes to each person, still, with an offer that is too good to be true: if you are willing to get beyond yourself... leave your family... have a little faith (*go to a land I will show you*)... take a little risk... then... God will make of you a great... people! Do you hear it? God never promises to make Abram a great person. There is no health, wealth, and prosperity gospel ("God wants to bless you!") in this formative covenant. More importantly, God promises to make Abram a great people. A nation. A community.

What life have you if you have not life together?
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The sin of the Hebrew people, which the prophets reminded them over and over, was that they had misunderstood their calling, that they had taken the blessing of God as an indication of a special divine favor, that they had claimed their prosperity as an individual right.

As individuals, each of you has been gifted by God, and blessed by the circumstances of your life. But the abundance of your life is not a right – it is a call for responsibility. Do you have a sense of obligation?

As a church, God has called us, together. But, is God making of us a great people? A community, even beyond ourselves? Will the world know God's blessing because of us – or only in spite of us?⁸ Do we have a collective sense of obligation?

As a nation, we have enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and almost unlimited freedom. But we have lost our way. Like the nation of Israel, we have turned our prosperity inward, rejoicing in an arrogant and self-absorbed claim of “manifest destiny.”⁹ History proves that an arrogant isolationism and a calloused indifference to the plight of the needy always leads to national calamity. When rights become more important than responsibilities, simply put, nations do not survive. Do we have a national sense of obligation?

And what does Jesus have to say regarding “rights talk”?

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; (What are my rights?) and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (What are my responsibilities?)

If we get tired of the charities and the Church calling us to do more, to serve more, to give more... we need to think again about our rights and our responsibilities, and we need to re-evaluate our sense of obligation. For the scripture tells us what Jesus made clear in no uncertain terms – that generosity is the purpose of our prosperity.¹⁰

⁸ I do not read the call of Abram exclusively, i.e., that God called out one nation for special favor and blessing. I believe the call of Abram is the reflection of a community, in retrospect, seeking to come to grips with the calling and responsibility that comes from accepting our birthright as children of God. Though we do not, I believe God loves everyone. Though life does not, I believe God blesses everyone. Accepting our calling is to realize that God is calling us to love everyone, and to reach out as a blessing to everyone.

⁹ During the sermon, I added an impromptu exclamation here: “God Bless America!” I get very weary of this statement as a political cry (what politician in the last ten years had ended a speech without these words?), because I believe implicit in this cry is a subtle and arrogant claim of supremacy, such as the Israelites were guilty. Perhaps I should have said in my mocking sarcasm, “God bless America, only.”

¹⁰ This is not stated explicitly, but if all prosperity is from God (*Every good and perfect gift is from above...* James 1.17), if each is to use the gift he/she has been given (1 Corinthians 12, et al), and if earthly treasures are not to be pursued (Matthew 6.19), then for what other purpose have we been blessed?

Generosity is the purpose of prosperity. And obligation, the source of life-giving joy.¹¹

May it be so!

¹¹ In the Prayer of Intercession that followed the sermon, Amy Jacks Dean highlighted the point of the sermon so well, turning “rights” and “responsibilities” on their heads, as she prayed in thanksgiving for the “right to take care of one another!”