

So Far, They Haven't Stopped Us

A Sermon by Jim Somerville, Oct. 1, 2003

First Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.

Acts 5:27-32.

Shhh. We have to be quiet. We're only a few blocks away from the White House, you know. And if they knew what we were up to they would probably try to stop us. Because right here in this room, Sunday after Sunday, we do something so radical, so revolutionary, that it threatens the very fabric of the American way of life.

We worship Jesus Christ.

That's right. Week after week we proclaim that Jesus is Lord, which means of course that Caesar is not, that George W. Bush is not, that the U. S. Government is not. You'd think they would shut us down for that kind of insurgent behavior but so far they haven't. Maybe we have them fooled. We come together on Sunday morning dressed like respectable citizens (for the most part). We don't violate the parking regulations (for the most part). We are polite, well-groomed and well-mannered (for the most part). If they sent any of their spies to check up on us they would find us sitting in orderly rows, following a neatly-printed program. There is nothing that smacks of anarchy here. No smell of gunpowder in the air, no talk of insurrection. We are, most of us, citizens of the United States of America, but above that and forever beyond it we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. It's not a secret. We haven't tried to hide it. But they don't seem to take our words and actions as seriously as we do, and for that reason they don't perceive us as a threat, and so far . . . they haven't stopped us.

They might if they knew we were actively recruiting for our cause, that we are forever searching for those human hearts where we might plant the flag of the kingdom. But we do our work so slowly, so stealthily, it's hard to perceive. It takes place through simple acts of love, and long conversations, and steadfast witness, one cup of coffee at a time. It's like a tiny mustard seed growing into a tree or yeast working its way through a lump of dough. If you weren't paying attention you might miss it.

But when a new convert is made we go public. We fill the baptistry with water, dress the candidate in a clean white robe, and then we pull back the red curtain over the altar so that everyone can see. I say a few words about what baptism means, I say a few words about the one who has come, and then ô in a solemn moment from which there can be no turning back ô I say to her, "Will you confess your faith?" Just as we have rehearsed she takes a deep breath and says, in a voice loud enough to be heard in the back of the room, "Jesus is Lord!" I always cringe at that moment. I almost expect to hear the sound of doors being kicked open, of heavy boots thudding down the center aisle, of rifle bolts being slammed into place. But so far they haven't stopped us. And here ô right here! ô in the nation's capital, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I dip that candidate under the waters of baptism and bring up a brand new citizen of the Kingdom.

We claim this citizenship through baptism; we sustain it through communion. Once a month, sometimes more, we gather around the Lord's table like a family gathering for a meal. We begin by reciting our covenant together, by pledging to live by the truth of this book, to reject the false gods of money, sex, and power, to worship God and have no other, to love our neighbors as ourselves. And then I lift up a loaf of bread and talk about one whose body was broken. I raise a chalice and speak of one whose blood was shed. And then we share those elements among all the believers who are present. We acknowledge our common union and anticipate the heavenly feast. We chew the body of Christ between our teeth, we taste his blood on our tongues, we acknowledge the heart-rending truth that someone has died for us, and that we needed to be died for. In such moments we remind ourselves that we will not be saved by the Republican Party or the Democratic Party, but only by Jesus Christ. And again, I almost expect to hear the sound of helicopters hovering overhead, the rumble of tanks on 16th Street, the sound of a voice shouting through a loudspeaker, "Come out with your hands up!" But so far they haven't stopped us. And month after month we "do this" in remembrance of him. As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 11 whenever we eat that bread and drink that cup we remember the Lord's death "until he comes."

Until he comes.

Which is to say we haven't put our faith in the United States government. As Eugene Peterson says, we believe "the American way of life is doomed to destruction, and that another kingdom is being formed right now in secret to take its place,"¹ that someday "the kingdom of the world" really will become "the kingdom of our Lord and Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Which makes it all the more miraculous that they haven't stopped us. At least, they haven't stopped us yet. But it can't last, can it? Our worship is public. Anyone can walk in here and see what we're up to. Someone could walk in right now! Someday they might. But until they do, until they stop us, we will keep on doing what we were made to do:

We will worship Jesus Christ.

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1 The Contemplative Pastor, p. 28. Peterson is joined in this kind of "subversive" thinking by Walter Brueggemann, Anthony Robinson, Martin Copenhaver, William Willimon, and Stanley Hauerwas, whose writings have contributed to this conversation.