

**12 Pentecost, Proper 16, Year B**  
**August 23, 2009**  
**Sermon by The Rev. Margie Shaw**

**John 6:56-69**

One of the publications I subscribe to is C.O.N.T.E.X.T. It is the brain-child of Martin Marty, with whom many of you may be familiar. Martin Marty is a religious scholar, a Lutheran who for years has been an interpreter of religion and culture. C.O.N.T.E.X.T. is kind of a readers' digest, if you will, compiled of articles and portions of articles from other publications on which Marty himself comments.

In the issue I received this week, the following heading grabbed my attention, "Does bad theology make good civil religion?" Marty is responding to an article from the May issue of *The New Republic*. He quotes, "Fights over the role of religion in American public life nearly always concern the question of which theology (and how much) should be incorporated into the country's civil religion – that is, into the spiritual dimension of its national identity." This wording – the spiritual dimension of our national identity – caused me to stop and ponder this notion – in our pluralistic society do we truly have a spiritual dimension that can be identified and defined?

The article to which Marty was responding said, "during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the mainline Protestant churches pretty much defined the spiritual identity of the country. Then, for a time more recently, the religious right tried to elevate to the public square, a synthesis of traditional evangelical Protestantism and orthodox Roman Catholicism. That in turn led to a backlash among the huge number of Americans who are: 1) non-Christians, 2) less fervent Christians or, 3) not-at-all religious Christians. . ."

Which brings us back to my question, "Where does this leave American society today?"

Now, in this same article, a sociologist, Christian Smith, is quoted. He calls our national spiritual dimension, 'Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism,' which can be summarized in five points. "First: A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. Second: God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Third: The central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Fourth: God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to solve a problem. And fifth: Good people go to heaven when they die." [After

reading this, I wanted to add: God wants us to have fresh breath, white teeth, and always smell good.]

Now, to be fair, there is no argument from the author of the article that “Theologically speaking, this watered-down, anemic, insipid form of Judeo-Christianity is pretty repulsive. But he would argue, that politically speaking, it’s perfect: thoroughly [benign], inoffensive, [and] tolerant. And that, [he says,] makes it well-suited to serve as the civil religion of the highly differentiated [and pluralistic] 21<sup>st</sup> century United States.

Hmmmm... I’m guessing that most of us recognize the importance of the separation between church and state, and I’m assuming that many of us no longer view the United States as a Christian nation in quite the same way that it was once defined.

I myself am okay with this. Quite possibly, it’s a good thing if it causes us to remember, think about and act on, who we are as Christians above and beyond being citizens of the United States. Our faith needs to inform our politics, whatever our politics might be, rather than our politics informing our faith.

In each of our readings this morning there is a theme of building towards the future. A new future is being issued in and a new structure is being prepared to make it possible. In the OT reading King Solomon dedicates the new temple. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians he writes about putting on the whole armor of God - the belt of truth, the breast plate of righteousness, and the shield of faith to protect ourselves from the forces of evil. We are to take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of The Spirit, which is the word of God, and we are to put on any shoes that will ready us to proclaim the gospel of peace. We are to pray at all times, keep alert, and persevere in supplication for all the saints.

“In the gospel, our Lord offers his own body as the nourishment on which the community must feed and be nurtured for the future” (Herbert O’Driscoll). Last week my challenge to you was to pray about and ponder what it means, in all reality, to consume Christ so completely that he consumes you.

Once again this week we hear *Jesus say, ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven,’ . . .*

*When many of his disciples heard this, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’. . . It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. . . What Jesus said was difficult and, because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’*

Lord, to whom can we go? Thank goodness we can be true red, white and blue citizens of the United States, a country, when at its best, supports and protects religious freedom. A country, when at its best, promotes equality, life liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But far above and beyond being citizens of the United States and being citizens of the world, we can be in eternal life with Christ, eternal life that begins now, a deep and meaningful life filled with adventure, challenge, and surprise – an empowered life. A life of delightful paradox, for when we empty ourselves of ourselves, we grow into the person God created us to be - a person with far more possibilities than we can imagine or pray for. A person God will use in ways that turn a bland spirituality, a bland theology, a bland life into one so meaningful that its depth and breadth will never be fully realized in this world.

Of course we want to be nice, we want to be happy, and we want to always smell good, but only in Christ can we be fully alive for he is the bread of life and he has the words of eternal life. Amen.