

July 4, 2021

Lessons in Luke: Conflicting Loyalties

Luke 9:18-27

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It's July 4th, an historic American day, so let's start with a little American history about the Pledge of Allegiance. Did you know that the original Pledge was written in August 1892 by a socialist minister named Francis Bellamy? It was first published in something called The Youth's Companion that same year. Bellamy had hoped that the pledge would be used by citizens in any country.

In its original form it read:

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

In 1923, the words, "the Flag of the United States of America" were added. And in 1954, in response to the Communist threat of the times, President Eisenhower encouraged Congress to add the words "under God," creating the 31-word pledge we say today.

I said the words of the Pledge of Allegiance every school day from my very first day of kindergarten. But the truth is, while I was taught to say the words from memory, I was never taught what they meant. I couldn't have told you what it really means to pledge allegiance to a flag, or what a republic is. It wasn't until a high school civics class that I understood that every time I said the pledge I was making an oath of loyalty to an idea, a people, a form of government and a way of living. That's some serious stuff, which is why it seemed strange to me that no one ever bothered to ask me if I wanted to pledge myself to those things.

While it may not appear so on the surface, there's something like a loyalty oath being discussed in our reading from Luke's Gospel today. And it isn't an oath that just lays claim to those disciples in the first century; it lays claim to our lives as well. As we continue our journey through Luke's Gospel let's read Luke 9: 18-27:

One day Jesus left the crowds to pray alone. Only his disciples were with him, and he asked them, "Who do

people say I am?"

"Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other ancient prophets risen from the dead."

Then he asked them, "But who do you say I am?"

Peter replied, "You are the Messiah sent from God!"

Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone who he was. "The Son of Man must suffer many terrible things," he said. "He will be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead."

Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

While Luke doesn't mention it, Matthew and Mark, who also record this story, tell us that it happened in a place called Caesarea Philippi. And that's significant. Caesarea Philippi was far north from Galilee where Jesus and his disciples did most of their ministry. In other words, they weren't just passing through. Jesus took them there for a reason. And that reason is revealed when you know the history of the place.

Caesarea Philippi had long been the site of worship for many different gods. The hillside where it's located is filled with niches where statues of various Greek gods had been placed. There's even evidence of human sacrifice to the gods having taken place there. In 14 AD the place was named Caesarea Philippi in honor of the Emperor, Augustus. In other words, for centuries this had been a place identified with people's deepest loyalties – first to the Greek gods, and later to the Roman Emperor.

Apparently, there were lots of rumors about who Jesus was – Elijah, one of the other prophets or even John

the Baptist come back to life. But it was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asks the question, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter, never afraid to be the first one to speak, answers, “You are the Messiah, sent from God.”

Understand what Peter has just done. We might be tempted to think that Peter answered this question like a contestant on a game show, as if getting the right answer will win him a prize. But it’s so much more than that. Peter has just made a pledge. A loyalty oath. By calling Jesus the Messiah of God, Peter is submitting his life to Jesus. He’s surrendering himself, which is no small matter in and of itself, but when you consider that he’s saying this in a place dedicated to the Roman Emperor, you begin to realize the seriousness of Peter’s words. Like most Jews, Peter would have thought that the Messiah had come to conquer the Romans to set the Jews free. Peter, by pledging his allegiance to Jesus, has just committed an act of treason, punishable by death, likely by crucifixion.

And all of that helps us to make sense of Jesus’ words, *“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?”* In other words, following Jesus is risky business, but it’s worth the risk. Rome can take your flesh-and-blood life, but only Jesus can give you life that is so much more than flesh-and-blood.

Jesus brought the disciples to Caesarea Philippi to confront them with the reality of conflicting loyalties.

You and I aren’t likely to face conflicting loyalties that threaten our flesh-and-blood lives, but our loyalty to Jesus and the values of the Kingdom of God are constantly being tested:

Forgive freely or hold a grudge?

Share your faith or be silent?

Spend money on something you really don’t need or give to those whose needs are not met?

Focus on your own agenda or make serving someone else your focus?

Worship or sleep in?

These aren’t always either/or decisions. Instead, I would suggest that they are decisions about aliveness. Or, to put it another way, instead of asking “What should I do?” perhaps we could ask ourselves, “Which

decision or which loyalty will truly enliven me?” Not just give me a quick endorphin rush, but really fill me with a sense of being fully alive. You see, our loyalties to the things of this world will often provide a kind of sugar high, a quick rush that soon wears off. You know how this works. You buy something that you’re sure is going to change your life, and within a week it’s in a drawer or at the back of a closet and you’re off looking for your next purchase.

But the way of Jesus is different. Sometimes it’s hard on the front end, but as we surrender, it breathes life into us. It’s hard to let go of a grudge, but when we surrender our hurt and anger, there is expansive freedom. It’s hard to let go of our agenda, but when we surrender, it and make someone else our focus, deep connection breathes deep joy into us. Jesus once said, *“I have come in order that you may have life – life in all it’s fullness.”* That’s what loyalty to Jesus births in us.

Friends, we are constantly pledging our allegiance to something or someone. Every day, by the choices we make, we are declaring our loyalties. I want to challenge you today to become aware of how our loyalties impact the dozens of decisions we make every day. Today’s Scripture reading begs the question, “To what or to whom will you pledge your allegiance?” And as you consider that question, know this: the whole of Scripture declares that God, in Jesus Christ, has pledged loyalty and love to you, no matter what decision you make. So the real question becomes... Just how much life do you want?