

## Humble audacity

1 Kings 8:22-30

August 27, 2006

On September 2, 1945, after accepting the surrender of the Japanese military forces, General Douglas MacArthur addressed the American people with these words:

*Men since the beginning of time have sought peace. Various methods through the ages have attempted to devise an international process to prevent or settle disputes between nations. From the very start workable methods were found insofar as individual citizens were concerned, but the mechanics of an instrumentality of larger international scope have never been successful. Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war. We have had our last chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door. The problem basically is theological and involves a spiritual recrudescence and improvement of human character that will synchronize with our almost matchless advances in science, art, literature and all material and cultural developments of the past two thousand years, It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh.*

He's right. The problem is theological: *It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh.*

Many would argue today, with good reason, that the problem is religious, that religion itself is a primary cause of conflict among people and nations, and there is no lack of evidence to make that case. Consider the recent war in Lebanon. On the one side of the conflict, you have Hezbollah, the self-designated "Party of God," and on the other, the nation of Israel, bolstered by claims of a divine right to a certain piece of land. Both sides believe they fight with God's approval and God's endorsement. Both sides invoke the name of God to validate their mission and to motivate their soldiers. But both cannot be right!

Or consider the United States' war on terrorism. On the one side of the conflict, you have a disparate but highly focussed group of Islamic extremists claiming a divine mandate for jihad, "holy war," and on the other, a nation led by a president who declares that God led him to invade Iraq and an administration that defends its military actions with religiously-charged language, characterizing this war as a fight between good and evil, which is to say that it is a righteous crusade, or even a holy war. Both sides believe they fight with God's approval and God's endorsement. Both sides invoke the name of God to validate their mission and to motivate their soldiers. But both cannot be right!

It is possible that both are wrong, and I believe that in each of these cases, both sides are wrong, not because of their religious allegiances themselves, but because of their theology. MacArthur is right; the problem is theological.

The problem is not bad religion, but bad theology. It is not religion that leads us into war. There are plenty of other things that lead us into war without any religious prompting: envy, greed, pride, anger, hatred ... ambition, revenge, fear ... oil, money, land ... national defense, national security, nationalism. Religion usually comes into the picture after the fact, as a means of self-justification, as a means of enlisting support, as a tool for recruiting and motivating the troops. We, whoever "we" are, ask God to

sanction what we have already decided to do. We raise the banner of God's name over our cause ... without God's permission!

That is bad theology, believing that God will endorse our own individual or national agendas. It even borders on blasphemy -- misusing God's name, using God's name to advance our own particular aims. Good theology understands that we exist to do God's will, not God to do ours.

But bad theology is nothing new. It has been around for a long, long time! The kings of ancient Israel paid court prophets to tell them what they wanted to hear, to give reassurance of success in the wars they chose to pursue. It was other prophets, not paid by men or kings but called by God, that called the kings to account and urged them to serve God and the people by ruling with justice and righteousness and mercy. It took the theological integrity of God's prophets to challenge the misuses and abuses of power. Ancient Israel was a theocratic state, but the offices of prophet and priest and king were kept distinct, if only to remind the king that he was not God!

That, I think, is the genius of the separation of church and state built into our social order. It is designed as much to protect the church from the state as to protect the state from the church, to prevent the state from co-opting the church's proper role. The church serves the people best when it is not wed to the state, but stands apart in an adversarial position ... like the prophets.

Solomon was a king -- not a prophet, not a priest -- but when he stood before the altar in the newly completed Temple of the Lord, he did get his theology right. He ruled the united kingdom of Israel in the height of its earthly glory. Never before and never since has the nation of Israel enjoyed the kind of international renown and prosperity and freedom from threat that it enjoyed in Solomon's time. He didn't make it that way. He inherited the kingdom built by his father David, a kingdom won by much warfare and secured by fair dealings with friend and enemy alike. There was so much that David did wrong and so much that David did right! David built himself a fine palace and he wanted to build a Temple to honor the Lord, but the Lord's prophet told him, "No." David had caused too much bloodshed and the building of the Temple would be left to his heir.

Solomon did have the Temple built, and on the day of its dedication, he trumpeted his own achievement before the gathered crowds. But when he turned to the altar and prayed to God -- a public prayer, but a prayer sincerely intended for God's ears, not just for public consumption -- when he turned to the altar and prayed, he got it right:

*Lord God of Israel, there is no god like you in heaven above or on earth below!*

*Not even all of heaven is large enough to hold you, so how can this Temple that I have built be large enough?*

*Lord my God, I am your servant ...*

He got it right, because he understood his place and his role. He was the Lord's servant, not the Lord his servant. He did not pretend that the best he had to offer God, this wondrous Temple, could even begin to accommodate the Lord of the universe! At the moment of his greatest triumph, he publicly acknowledged his own limitations, deferred all glory to God, and humbled himself in God's presence. Humility is the essence of genuine faith.

But there is more to Solomon's prayer than deference and humility. He addresses God on his own behalf and on behalf of the people. He is blunt and bold and audacious, asking God to keep covenant, to keep his promises, to listen, to answer, to protect, to forgive, to bless, to save, asking God to pay close attention to this Temple that Solomon has built and to the people who will come to it seeking God's help. High expectation is the mark of genuine faith.

Humility and high expectation together -- audacious humility, humble audacity -- make for good theology. And, as MacArthur said, the problem is theological.

The problem of entrenched and unending conflict is not a religious problem. We will not solve anything by getting rid of religion or by getting rid of any one religion or by putting all religions on equal footing or by reducing religion to its lowest common denominator. We will not solve anything by keeping religion out of the public arena or by keeping the public arena out of church.

The problem of entrenched and unending conflict is a theological problem. We ask God to bless what we are going to do anyway, instead of seeking to know and to do God's will. And we depend too much on our own wisdom and strength and purpose, individually and collectively, instead of counting on God to do what God has promised to do. We depend too much on ourselves and expect too little of God. We are too proud to see that God's purposes are much higher and deeper and broader than our own, that blessing me and mine is only one small part of God's agenda! And yet we are too proud too to see that God can and will and truly wants to bless me and mine, and you and yours, and them and theirs, if only we ask! What we need, what our world needs, is a good dose of humble audacity!