

Rev. Martha Kearse

July 5, 2009

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Horns Up!

Mark 10:37-45; Psalm 46; 1 Corinthians 12:12-20

Band, Horn's Up! When I was a senior in high school, I had the great privilege of being the drum major of the E. C. Glass High School marching band. Let me explain that term—the drum major is not the same as a majorette. The majorette's twirl batons, and I couldn't twirl a baton for anything. The drum major's job is to be the field conductor—basically, to be the band director during the performance. One of the thrills of this particular position was getting to call the band to attention, and then to the “horn's up.” I would say (4 claps), “Band, attention!” In one motion, they would all snap to attention, all straight and aligned with each other on the field. Then I would say, (4 claps), “Band, horn's up!” As one, all of the instruments would flip into position—foom! And all the flags would snap down to the ground—slam! All in one second's time, as one unit. Every time it happened, I was stunned by the small miracle that it was—that unity of 200 members of the band, unity of motion and intent and purpose.

Unity is not a new idea—it's an idea that has been around as long as there have been people and those people have gathered into societies, although it has been a fairly elusive idea—it is one that the founders of this country felt strongly—the holiday we are celebrating this weekend gives us a chance to take a close look at what happened at the beginnings of this country. The success of the revolution was not a foregone conclusion by any means. At the time, it was actually pretty chancey. Members of the Philadelphia congress were aware of the danger of what they were doing and the likelihood of their failure—Benjamin Harrison—a representative from Virginia, was overheard joking with Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts: “I shall have a great advantage over you, Mr. Gerry, when we are all hung for what we are now doing. From the size and weight of my body I shall die in a few minutes, but from the lightness of your body you will dance in the air an hour or two before you are dead.” Joseph J. Ellis, in his book *Founding Brothers*, explains that there was every chance that the signers of the Declaration of Independence would be caught and hung. Had the British used the full measure of their force in the early stages of the revolution, it would have been crushed and its leaders hung for sedition. And the experiment here in America would have ended before it really began.

Once the revolution was successful—a feat that owes a great deal to the skill of George Washington in battle, to the diplomacy of Benjamin Franklin with the French, to the arrogance of the British leadership, and to many, many strokes of extraordinary good luck on the American side—once that was done, the success of the new American gov't was also not a foregone conclusion. The country consisted of 13 colonies, basically the Eastern seaboard, which varied widely in their populations, in their cultural makeup, and in their economic realities. While the men in leadership in most of the states were very similar to each other—they were both propertied and educated—they were not representative of the people who populated their states. Despite their similarities of background, they had many basic, core values in disagreement. You may have heard of *The Federalist Papers*. What you may not know is that there was an intense debate over whether we would create a strong federal government, which ruled over the states, or have strong state governments, with a weaker central government. Some people feared a strong central government. This was a topic of vigorous and emotional debate. There was also the debate over the assumption of debts after the Revolutionary war. The country had amassed a fairly significant amount of debt during the war, but states like VA and southern states (except So. Car.) had paid off debts. So while some people wanted the federal government to assume all the debt, others felt this would be unfair to states which had already paid off their debts. The most contentious issue, of course, was the issue of slavery, which we will talk about more later—hold that thought.

Interestingly for us as Christians, the situation in early America is very similar to the situation in the early church. For example, the church at Jerusalem was made up of Jewish Christians. Their background was as people who had been raised as Jews within the law and then had become followers of Jesus. But soon there

were also these followers of Paul, whose background was Greek and Gentile and pagan. They were very different. And the rules were unclear as to who could be a Christian and what that process looked like. At the same time, there was an ongoing struggle between two of the great leaders. On the one side there was Peter, who kind of represented the Jewish Christians and who allowed for circumcision as a necessity for becoming a Christian. On the other side, there was Paul, who said that circumcision to become part of the Christian church was ridiculous and said so repeatedly.

Many passages in the New Testament make clear that the infighting in the churches of the time was significant and problematic. In 1 Corinthians 1:12, Paul talks about that there are already factions: some following Cephas, some Apollos, and some followers of Paul. In his note in the book of Philippians 9:2 Paul makes a specific note to two of the women of the church, telling them to behave. He instructs the church to make them get along. In Romans 3, the issue of circumcision comes up again, and whether or not people would have to actually cut on their bodies in order to become Christians.

And it isn't just Paul who talks about this dissention, Peter also addresses it. Peter tells the church to "seek peace and pursue it" (1 Peter 3:11). He's not talking about fighting the Romans—he's talking about the interior of the Christian church. When we begin to look at all these struggles, we begin to wonder how it is possible for any of these entities—the American government or the Christian church—to survive.

Well the first thing to note is that survival does not come easily. I will illustrate that by telling you about my experiences in the band. I did not start out as the drum major of the band. I started as the lowliest member of a 200 member band—a freshman flautist. As the lowest member of the band, I was placed at the very end of the company front, as far from the interesting stuff that was happening at the 50 yard line as possible. My freshman year, our band director signed us up to do the half-time show at a Washington Redskins game. We were very excited about the chance to play at a professional football game—we got to watch part of the first half of the game, then lined up to march into the stadium. Now, as the end of the company front, I was the first to march into the stadium. My job was to listen to the beat of the drummer and march to a certain yard-line and stop. Normally pretty easy. But in a stadium full of thousands of people in the middle of a football game, I could not hear the drummer and I couldn't see the numbers on the yard-lines. So, in front of all those people and, for a moment, on national TV, I marched the entire band 10 yards too far. The drum majors had to come up and get the whole band to march backwards for 10 yards to get us to the right place on the field.

Beyond that, there were other problems in the band. There were drum majors who abused their power. There were power struggles between the various leaders of the sections—percussionists vs. trumpeters, flags vs. the band. There was one time during my senior year when the whole percussion section refused to take the field in protest over the way the band director disciplined one of their members. So how could it hold together? How do you get 200 teenagers to all do the same thing at one time? Could you do it?

It was the vision of the band director. Now, I know you are savvy sermon observers and you may be thinking that the metaphor here is the band director is like God. Well, he thought he was God. He was actually about 5'2" and kind of annoying. But he taught us that we practiced on the field we would do in the performance. My senior year, his vision including Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." It included a rare solo from a clarinetist, right at the beginning of the show and ended with a fabulous company front with every horn in the band blasting its music to the stands. It was magnificent and I loved being part of it. And it was only possible because we followed the vision of our little band director.

And what about the American experiment? With all those tensions, all those disagreements, it should have exploded before it even began. How did it hold together? In this case it was held together not by one person, but by a common idea. This idea was the idea of "the people." Now I have to tell you that for the first 20 years of its existence our country could not really be called a democracy. At best it might be called an oligarchy. All the guys from the Revolution stepped up and became the presidents: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe. They took over from each other and kept that vision going. Not until John Quincy Adams do you get the next generation—and he was a terrible president—not until the next president, Jackson, do you truly get away from the oligarchy of the revolution.

It was an idea—Ellis describes it this way—"Sovereignty did not reside with the federal government or the individual states; it resided with 'the people.' What that meant was anybody's guess, since there was no such thing at this formative stage as an American "people"; indeed, the primary purpose of the Constitution was

to provide the framework to gather together the scattered strands of the population into a more coherent collective worthy of that designation.” Pp. 9-10 An idea—an ideal—a thought of a way that it could be—and although there was much heated debate over the ways to reach that ideal, still the ideal held sway and held together the disparate elements of this strange new country.

And the church? What held the church together? Well, listen to what Peter says in I Peter 3:15: “But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord.” For Peter, our unity, our purpose, comes in Christ, in making Christ the Lord of our lives, individually and collectively. In chapter 4:8 he also calls on the people to love each other deeply and says “love covers a multitude of sins.” Paul uses metaphor, and his metaphor is one that we’re very familiar with. And his metaphor is one that we’re very familiar with, the metaphor of the church as the body with Christ as the head. We know this metaphor well, and we know it so well, that we don’t see its extraordinary nature.

It is striking in several regards

1)although the individual needs the body, the value of the individual is not lost—Paul speaks often of how each part is necessary for the health of the whole body

2)NO hierarchy is set up—Christ is the head—you may be the pinkie toe, but the body cannot run without the pinkie toe—it needs every part and no one part can set itself up as more important (something churches like to forget)

It’s not like communism, which says the individual must be subsumed into the whole—the individual is lost for the good of the whole

It’s not like democracy, where the rights of the individual are paramount—particularly the individual with power or money or both

Most like the scene in “Roots” I’m sure if you’ve seen the series “Roots” you remember the moment when the father takes his newborn child and holds that child up to the universe and says, “Behold, the only thing greater than yourself!” When I was 12, I was confused by this and said, “Who’s he talking to?” But as I got older I realized that that was the point. When the father holds the child up, he’s saying to the univers, “This individual is more important than the whole universe.” At the same time, he shows the universe to the child as says, “But you are very small and only one part of the great universe.”

That is the message that Paul is trying to carry out. Not that you must lose yourself but that your self is intimately valuable to the whole body of the church. The whole body of the church moves as one because it has one head and that is Christ.

So let’s think about the power of unity. Think about this. When it came time to chose a motto for the new country, we could have chosen from many strong mottos. Virginia’s was “Death to Tyrants,” or there was the popular Revolutionary motto—“Don’t Treat on Me.” Did we choose those? No we did not. We chose E Pluribus Unum—1782—the Great Seal—motto—not we’re really tough—not freedom for everyone—but e pluribus unum—from many, one—out of many, unity.

Out of a rag-tag collection of states, which barely had their own identity, the original leaders of our country formed a union, a people, because of their understanding that nothing less than a union would survive. And although we take it for granted now, it could not have been easy. Their feelings on the issues of that day were as diverse and emotional as the disparate philosophies in our country today. Alexander Hamilton was a deeply controversial figure, who eventually made one man, Aaron Burr, so angry, that he shot him in a duel. More significantly, there were many abolitionist factions present during the forming of the country—very strong, vocal movements against slavery and the slave trade in America. Looking back on it, we could even argue that the compromises made in the forming of the constitution (which, Ellis suggests, amounted to remaining silent on the issue) were wrong and should not have been made. What those early American politicians did, though, they did because they saw a greater good in the formation of a solid and reliable American government, one that had checks and balances, and that allowed for some flexibility as the country evolved. It cannot have been easy for those in leadership to know they were right and still compromise in order for the union to stand.

I don’t know about you, but I run into this all the time, especially in my marriage. In the early years of my marriage, I was stunned by how difficult it was to get across to my sweet husband that I was right. The

topics on which I attempted to win points varied widely—everything from whether the dog should come in at night to how much we should spend in refurbishing the kitchen. I wish I could tell you a story of some blinding epiphany—I actually don't get many of those. What I got was the gradual realization of what a marriage truly is—you know that line in the Simon and Garfunkel song about going off to look for America? He says, "Let us be lovers, we'll marry our fortunes together." That's it, isn't it? Our fortunes are married together—my rightness is not what's at stake or what is even remotely important. What's important is that he is mine and I am his and we go through whatever comes together.

Do you ever wonder what could we do if we truly stood together? What we could do if Christ was truly our head and we acted as one body, in concert with only his commands? I think of the Methodist Women—possibly the least powerful, least threatening group of human beings on the planet--and the Nestle boycott of the 1970's and 80's—The Nestle company began a process of going to third world countries and would send women dressed as nurses with their company's formula. The mothers of babies were convinced that they should be using the formula to feed their babies. Except that they couldn't afford to buy enough formula to feed the babies, so they would water it down. And their water was not always clean. And the babies, who were otherwise healthy, began to get dysentery and even to die. The Methodist women, hearing of this practice, began boycotting Nestle products. They continued their boycott for 15 years, until the World Health Organization took notice and created a rule which prohibited the practice of using women dressed as nurses. Although the Nestle company is a powerful company and continues questionable practices in marketing their formula in the third world, the Methodist women continue their boycott and stand firm against these practices. Here is an example of a true church, with Christ at its head—it wasn't about a great speaker, or a tremendous community organizer. It was about all of them, together saying, "No! You will not use MY money for this deception."

Like those sons of Zebedee who wanted to sit at the side of Jesus, what we often want is to be recognized, to gain the privileges of power and to be right, to take our chance to be the ones who say, "I did well!" And every time we try it, Jesus says, "Well, the call is to follow me. And my path is a little more difficult than sitting at the right hand of the throne. You might get that, I don't know. But the call, first, takes you along a path that may be rocky and difficult, and you must follow it, even if it leads to the cross."

In the coming weeks and months, it will be tempting for us to want to be right. With so many decisions to make, so much of our future as a church at stake, it will be so easy for each of us to find a path he or she likes and decide that it is right, and cling to it with everything we've got. It will be so easy to fall into the patterns the world teaches—"Go to the mattresses!" "Stick with your guns!" "Go down fighting!" But did you know, that as much as Paul vilified the practice of the Jerusalem church of requiring Gentile converts to get circumcised, he also took up a collection at every church he went to and brought that money back to support the Jerusalem church? As difficult as those early years in the life of the Christian church must have been, with persecution from outside the church, and conflict within the church, the church survived because it chose one leader above all—the One God. We are called to do the same—to be the body, working in concert with each other and answering to one voice, one call—the God who is our refuge, represented in the person of Jesus Christ. Under that leadership, it won't matter what our political opinions are, or whether we are fiscally conservative or economically liberal. Democrat, Republican, white, black, Asian, Hispanic, hawk or dove, phenomenally well-off or worried about the next house payment—under the leadership of our God and our Christ, we can stand together in front of the world and say, "We are one!"

Joseph Ellis says that the American revolution and the framing of the constitution should not be compared to a symphony because they lacked harmony. I would submit to you that Joseph Ellis was never in a band. If he had been, he would know that about 90% of the life of a band is disharmony—it's argument, it's personalities, it's conflict and battle. But when the conductor raises his hand and calls the band to attention, it is all forgotten in the pursuit of the common purpose and out of the conflict of even a moment earlier comes the most glorious harmony, the miraculous blending of sound that is more than the sum of its parts. We are similarly called—we are called to be God's people. Like that band, we may spend our time in conflict, in mistakes, in heading the wrong direction, even in anger and in doubt. But we have a director who sees the big picture and it is time now to listen for His call, to be ready when He says, "Band, horns up!"