

THE AGRIPPA SYNDROME

ACTS 26:1-3, 22-29

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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

No, the title of today's sermon is not taken from the latest Robert Ludlum spy thriller. Nor is it the name of a new medical disorder. Rather the Agrippa Syndrome describes what happens in today's story from Acts when St. Paul lobbies for the faith before the patrician king Agrippa.

Agrippa was the last in a long line of Herods who governed the tiny, contentious land-bridge between Europe and Africa. His story is interesting and sad because it is the last time we see him or his lineage on the stage of history.

Like the sabertooth tiger bowing to extinction, Agrippa was in his lifetime a powerful figure, sophisticated, urbane, but has no spiritual descendants because of his inability to receive the abundant life Paul offers.

It is the week of July 4th and I would like to consider this morning Agrippa's story in light of our nation's birthday and God's invitation to each one of us to new life.

9/11 still looms. Like a family in grief this first year after the tragedies at national holidays we are reflecting and soul searching. John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, put his finger on the task before us, "I do not believe as some do that 'we brought 9/11 on ourselves,' that American political and moral foibles resulted in us 'getting what we deserved,' not at all. But I do believe that we should not excuse ourselves too quickly from a painful but necessary period of national introspection."ⁱ

At such times Americans turn to the life of the spirit to draw strength and inspiration. The founding fathers called for national days of prayer and fasting during the Revolution. Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War on a bleak December day from the steps of the capitol on his second inaugural said, "the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country."ⁱⁱ

But what sort of new thinking and action is required to meet our new circumstances? I would like to probe an important dilemma with you this morning. It has to do with the role religion plays in our personal and national life. There are two opposite views.

The first is represented by many people but I choose House majority whip, the third most powerful person in the United States Congress, Representative Tom DeLay. At a recent meeting of evangelical Christians Mr. DeLay said he believes God is using him to "promote a biblical worldview in American politics."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Only Christianity offers a way to understand that physical and moral border. Only Christianity offers a comprehensive worldview that covers all areas of life and thought, every aspect of creation, he said. Only Christianity offers a way to live in response to the realities that we find in this world – only Christianity."^{iv}

I don't know about you but I find Mr. DeLay's comments offensive and distasteful. Had they been the words of an average Joe in the street I would be less disturbed. But coming from the lips of one of the most powerful people in our nation raises my hackles and anxiety.

Yet in response to such religious zealotry is another and equally debilitating view of religion. It goes something like this: "all beliefs are merely opinions, personal points of view. It is fine for you to hold those points of view as long as you don't tell anybody else about them or try to convince anyone else that what you see may be a truthful depiction of what is."^v

This way of dealing with our religious and political differences is by denying, says William Willimon, that any of those differences matter. What we are really saying is "I am glad for people to be religious, as long as they keep their religion to themselves. Religion is wonderful, as long as we first all agree that it doesn't mean anything."^{vi}

The result is, you see, we are between the horns of a dilemma. Either religion has come to mean something narrow, exclusive and mean or it has come to represent nothing at all. No more significant than the color of the tie you chose this morning.

If the first response is the Tom DeLay Syndrome, the second is that of Agrippa. And unless I miss my guess, Agrippa's affliction is the one with which most of us can identify. Erudite, urbane, classically trained, university educated. Maybe even a degree in public policy from Harvard or Princeton. Agrippa was the master of the cool managerial approach: step back, weigh the options, take your time, be dispassionate. Friendly, mind you, but dispassionate.

Agrippa listens to one of the most eloquent expositions of the faith ever uttered and says to Paul, in the haunting words of the King James, "almost thou persuadest me to become a Christian." They are among the last words he speaks before his exit. "Almost is a sad word under the best of circumstances," says Fred Buechner, "and here, on the lips of the last of his line the last time you see him, it has a special poignance."^{vii}

If only Paul had been a little more eloquent. If only Agrippa had been a little more receptive, a little braver, a little crazier. If only God weren't such a stickler for letting people make up their own minds without coercing them, says Buechner.

But things are what they are. Almost is the closest Agrippa got to what might have changed his life. It is sad enough to miss the boat at all, but to miss by inches, with a saint right there to hand you aboard, is sadder still.^{viii}

One way to put it is to say that Agrippa is being open-minded and tolerant. A less charitable way is that Agrippa is indecisive, tentative, has failure of intellectual nerve, and lacks guts. Not leadership befitting a king. Nor you or me for that matter.

Why all the fuss about Agrippa today? What makes his paralysis and indecision worthy of our concern on this Sunday before the Fourth of July?

Because on this day of all days we are called to remember what our faith and this country was built upon. The courage of our convictions.

My old teacher of preaching at Yale Bill Muehl used to tell the story of visiting the home of a New England dowager. She proudly displayed her great grandfather's musket over the fireplace of their ancestral home.

Professor Muehl admiring the antique weapon asked, "That looks old; was it used in the revolution?" "The musket dates to just before the revolution," said his host. "But it was never actually used. My great grandfather could never muster much enthusiasm for Mr. Washington's revolution."^{ix}

Can you imagine that Connecticut Yankee sitting by the fireplace through the summer and fall of 1776? His neighbors coming by and urging, "get your gun, John, the Redcoats are down at New Haven. It is time to stand up for our land and our life!" Yet, John stayed in his rocker going back and forth, like Agrippa, over the pros and cons. Weighing Mr. Washington's revolution. Concluding the fight against excise taxes and import duties was an overreaction.^x Almost, said Agrippa, almost thou persuadest me.

Thank goodness there were some who did muster enthusiasm for Mr. Washington's revolution. Who made it their revolution. Who signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 at great risk to themselves, their families and their personal property.

John Hancock after signing his name in those large shaded letters said, "There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles, and may now double his reward of 500 pounds for my head. That is my defiance!" Dr. Franklin, also a signatory responded with characteristic wit and confidence "we must all hang together," he said, "or most assuredly we shall hang separately."

Ray Berg, a member of Westminster who has done no small research on this moment in history and to whom I am indebted for these anecdotes, Ray says these brave men set forth on a path they knew not where it would lead. They had a burning desire to be freed from the harsh yoke of the Crown of Great Britain, were willing to undergo persecution to reach the goal of freedom and a new life...they were not placard protestors or muddle-headed dreamers, but clearheaded solid citizens putting everything on the line. The closing sentence of their proclamation declares, "for the support of this Declaration with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." I urge you this week to find a copy of that stirring document and let it excite your soul.^{xi}

Support and sacrifice they did. **William Floyd** fled with his family to Connecticut where they lived without income for seven years and returned to their home in New York to find it destroyed. **Phillip Livingstone** of New York had his properties confiscated and his family driven from their homestead. He died in 1778. **John Hart** of Trenton tried to return home to see his dying wife but was chased by Hessian soldiers finally returned to find his wife buried, his thirteen children taken away, his farm destroyed. **Judge Richard Stockton** of New Jersey arrested, beaten, jailed, starved, died an invalid.

On and on the stories of the fifty-six signers go. Accounts of bravery, sacrifice, conviction.

The battlefield today is not so much over our political ideology as it is over our moral and religious convictions.

The danger for those of us who do not subscribe to Mr. DeLay's point of view is we will retreat into a deep reticence to commit much of anything to our personal religious faith and action.

The danger is we will become a nation of intellectually enlightened but spiritually lukewarm Agrippas.

Terry Gross, of the NPR show "Fresh Air" recently interviewed Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, two New Testament scholars.

She asked them, 'what do you do with the fact that some Christians believe they are right and everybody else is wrong?' With all the trouble, controversy and bloodshed in the world, isn't that sort of dangerous? Do you believe Jesus is the one and only way?

Professor Borg replied he did not believe Jesus was the only way, that there were many different ways to God. This has become the standard, mushy response to questions like those of Ms. Gross. An unwillingness to say Jesus is right combined with an absolute, dogmatic, sweeping certitude that nobody else could be right either.

But Dr. Wright replied, "your question is interesting. You are assuming that the conflict and violence in the world is due to people thinking that they are right. From a Christian point of view, we would say that people who commit violence toward other people, are not just being fanatical, they are being wrong. There are some ideas that are wrong.

Our different ideas are ways of making sense out of the world. And the way we make sense out of the world means we live in very different places in the world. I think it is important to be honest, as honest as we can about the ways that we are making sense out of the world, honest about our differences.

Simple honesty, as well as respect for people's differences, means that no one can seriously say all religious people are basically all moving in the same direction and they are sort of all saying the same thing. I do think it is possible to make sense out of the world without needing to put everybody else down."^{xii}

If you feel like staying in your rocker weighing your options rather than standing up and proclaiming the truth of the Gospel this morning either because you feel you don't have a right to make an absolute, universal claim about your faith or because you are afraid of crossing some line of political correctness then you might already be suffering from Agrippa's Syndrome.

But what this church and city and nation need now are people who are willing – like St. Paul – to go to Rome or Maine or Buffalo's east side to announce as he did first before Agrippa, then before Caesar – the truth which gives men and women life and hope and justice. Amen.

Endnotes:

¹ John Buchanan, “To Think And Act Anew,” The Christian Century, October 10, 2001; vol. 118, no. 27.

¹ Buchanan.

¹ Alan Cooperman, “DeLay says God is using him to promote ‘biblical worldview,’” The Buffalo News, spring 2002, page A-11.

¹ Cooperman.

¹ William Willimon, “The Sin of Indecision,” Pulpit Resource, April, May, June 2002, p. 54.

¹ Willimon.

¹ Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who (San Francisco: Harper, 1979) p. 8.

¹ Buechner.

¹ Willimon, cited above, who preceded me at Yale Divinity School, refers to this story from his days under the tutelage of Professor Muehl. I also remember Muehl telling this story to great affect. It was a chestnut and he told better than Willimon or me.

¹ This sentence was taken from Carl Dennis’ poem “History,” in Practical Gods, (New York: Penguin Books, 2002)10. Dennis’ poem explores the issues raised in this sermon.

¹ Ray Berg, “Unsung Heroes.” Unpublished. Ray Berg was good enough to share this paper with me and his concern that our nation has no public monument or remembrance to his knowledge of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence. Some conservative radio hosts have made this a cause celebre, yet that should not deter anyone from supporting the erection of an appropriate monument to the memory of the signers.

¹ This wonderful excerpt from the “Fresh Air” show was provided in Willimon’s article.

ⁱ John Buchanan, “To Think And Act Anew,” The Christian Century, October 10, 2001; vol. 118, no. 27.

ⁱⁱ Buchanan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alan Cooperman, “DeLay says God is using him to promote ‘biblical worldview,’” The Buffalo News, spring 2002, page A-11.

^{iv} Cooperman.

^v William Willimon, “The Sin of Indecision,” Pulpit Resource, April, May, June 2002, p. 54.

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