

"Faithful Citizenship" - "Conscience for Our Country"
by James McGinnis, Institute for Peace & Justice, 2008

2008 is a kairos moment for our country and our faith communities. A song from the 60s still dances in my head - "Which way, America, are you going to go?"

At many sporting events since 9/11/2001, "God Bless America" has been sung, but I wonder how many really attend to the final five words - "...Stand beside her and guide her through the night **with the light from above.**"

Indeed, the guiding principles and vision for our country must come "from above," from God and those through whom God speaks. I'd like to share several voices through whom I hear God speaking to us, our Church, and our country and showing us how to embrace that vocation of "prophet" to which we, too, have been called.

Through Jeremiah, God comforts us in our uncomfortableness in speaking out prophetically. "'...I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.' I said, 'Ah, Lord Yahweh; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!' But Yahweh replied, 'Do not say, 'I am a child'. Go now to those to whom I send you and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you -- it is Yahweh who speaks!'" (Jeremiah 1:4-9).

Just as Jeremiah was sent to confront the religious and political leaders of his time, so too are we called and sent to speak to the leaders of our own time. Is speaking prophetically to our political leaders a way of serving our country? Both Henry David Thoreau and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. answer with a courageous and humble "yes." While Thoreau sees some people serving their country mostly with their bodies (e.g., military personnel) and others serving mostly with their heads (e.g., political leaders), he identifies with a third group. "A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, serve the State with their consciences also, and necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated by it as enemies." (1)

Dr. King urges us individually and as a Church to be that group of citizens willing to serve our country with our consciences, to bring God's light from above to bear on the vision, principles and policies of our country -

"A time comes when silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men [and women] do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war... Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us... We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls "enemy;" ...for there will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries." (2)

Even with our uncertainties about the specifics of some domestic and foreign policies, we must speak, but with humility and openness to the insights of others. Convicted by the Word of God

and listening to the cries of those on the receiving end of many of our national policies, we must speak out - on behalf of the poor and vulnerable, from womb to tomb.

Dr. King saw his vocation as one of redeeming the soul of our nation. "Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam. . . The time has come for a real prophecy, and I'm willing to go that road." (3)

Our Bishops told us the same thing in their 1983 pastoral letter on peace -

" To teach the ways of peace is not to weaken the nation's will but to be concerned for the nation's soul... The virtue of patriotism means that as citizens we respect and honor our country, but our very love and loyalty make us examine carefully and regularly its role in world affairs asking that it live up to its full potential as an agent of peace with justice for all people." (The Challenge of Peace, 1983, #304, #327)

In his prophetic vision, Dr. King saw what was at stake - our survival as a country, as a beacon for others; or face the same fate as earlier empires -

"This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all humankind. We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation... History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate.

"We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action.... Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves in the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (4)

Like 1968, we have entered extremely critical election year. As God's voice, what light do we bring to this moment of decision and direction? It's hard to raise tough issues like war and poverty. In the face of such reluctance, we as a faith community and as individual religious leaders need to hear with hearts wide open the word of God through the prophet Ezekiel - "If the sentry sees the sword coming and fails to blow the warning trumpet, so that the sword comes and takes anyone, I will hold the sentry responsible for that person's death. Behold, I appoint you as sentry for my people." (Ezekiel 33:1-7).

It seems clear to me that "a sword is coming" and we have the prophetic responsibility to "warn the people." Could it be that this "sword" is less al-Qaida than it is a foreign policy that seeks to preserve our global empire? Could it be that this "sword" is a privileged American way of life that seeks to preserve itself by controlling as much of the world's resources as possible? Could the "sword" be the sin of inhospitality barring immigrants by more border fences and patrols? Could this "sword" be a wastefully consumptive economy and way of living that threaten the future of our planet? What other "swords" do you see coming?

Whatever wording you choose to frame these questions, it seems to me that we have a responsibility as "faithful citizens," as the "conscience for our country," to raise these questions this election year and reflect on them in that "light from above." As family life ministers, you can raise these issues in your writing - in diocesan publications and parish bulletins, as well letters to editors and to political representatives and candidates and encouraging others to do the same. You can advocate that the "Faithful Citizenship" document be widely used in your diocese and parishes. You can organize educational programs with speakers who are advocates for, or who have been impacted by, these issues. Bumper stickers, yard signs, and silent public witness all help us break the silence, while prayer and fasting deepen our engagement.

We can also raise these questions indirectly - by the example of our own lives, as we try to resolve conflicts with openness to all involved, as we simplify our lifestyles and share the savings with others, as we reduce our "carbon footprint" on the planet, and as we welcome immigrants into our homes and parishes and speak for them in conversations as well as in public meetings.

God speaks to our reluctance as God did to Jeremiah - "Go now to those to whom I send you and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you..." For the sake of our world, our planet, and the soul of our country and our Church as well, let us pray together that we will each say "yes."

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- 1 Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in Peter Hayer, ed, *THE PACIFIST CONSCIENCE*; Chicago: Henry Regnery Co; 1971; pp. 142-3.
 - 2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break the Silence," 4/4/67; in James Washington, ed, *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: Essential Writings & Speeches*
 - 3 Dr. King, quoted in Vincent Harding, "Road to Redemption", *THE OTHER SIDE* magazine, p. 14.
 - 4 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break the Silence,"