

CHRISTIAN PATRIOTISM: CELEBRATION AND TENSIONS

July 1, 2007

Exodus 20:1-3

I love the Fourth of July! For me, patriotism is not an obligation, rather a disposition that brings me joy. In recent months I have been reading again the words and studying once more the vision of the founders of this nation. Only the term “brilliance” can describe the level of their insight, the detail of their planning, the imagination that fed their anticipation of what would be needed, and the strong courage with which they rose above personal prejudices to commit themselves to big ideas that, if realized, could make this nation an example for respecting the rights of minorities and providing the privileges of citizenship to all people without respect to their religion or lack of religion, and making this land a sanctuary for civil discourse and the politics of diversity that would stand us in good stead at home and around the world.

At the same time, I must confess that the Fourth of July also sensitizes me to tempestuous tensions that tear at my heart, disturb my mind, bother my spirit, and turn patriotism into a burden as well as a joy because of the manner in which it challenges my faith. Sometimes I am as moved by the inspiration of a text from Thomas Jefferson as I am a scripture penned by the Paul of Tarsus. I love the apostle’s words in his letter to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” But I also love Thomas Jefferson’s words in his letter to Benjamin Rush, “I have sworn before the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

My emotions can be as easily launched into flight by an encounter with true democracy as by an experience of profound spirituality. Of course, I know the difference between the two. I am well aware that to confuse patriotism and religion is to risk idolatry, invite spiritual disaster, and jeopardize democracy.

As we prepare for our 2007 celebration of the Fourth of July, this morning I invite you to look with me at the relentless tug-of-war that occurs in the lives of people who take seriously both their faith and their citizenship. The order of worship for today is intended to sensitize us to predictable tensions in the lives of Christian patriots.

Civil Authority and Spiritual Authority

Mark 12:13-17

How beautiful are the words and melody of that anthem (*I Vow to You My Country*), but how totally impossible is the fulfillment of its intent. We cannot vow to God *and* to country the entirety of our love, promising to ask no questions and to make for each the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus admonished his disciples to be discerning enough to give to the nation only what belongs to a government and to God what belongs to no other person or institution. Failure to heed the words of Jesus invites serious problems.

One of the worst congregational conflicts in which I was ever involved as a pastor occurred among a tight-knit group of people who disagreed about the appropriateness of displaying the American flag in their place of worship. For a while a compromise kept an uneasy peace among them. The Christian flag stood on one side of the worship center and the American flag on the other. Eventually, though, a sizable number of people in that church insisted that the American flag be removed—not because they didn't like it, most of them had fought under its shadow and risked their lives to unfurl it in the wind swept battle fields where they walked among the dead bodies of their friends. The issue was one of authority and the meaning of loyalty. Conscientious patriots wanted no confusion between their responsibility to the nation and their devotion to God, especially in a house of worship.

Typically, we laud passages in the Bible in which people of God stood boldly against political leaders and disobeyed civil law to be true to a spiritual conscience. Early in my life, my church commended to me the actions of Peter and John who, according to the book of Acts, told government authorities that they would preach of what they believed even if it was against the law. But set those circumstances in a contemporary context and measure their explosive meaning in relation to the multiple religious perspectives in this nation. In the judicial hearings on the confirmation of John Ashcroft's nomination to be the chief law enforcement officer in the nation, he rightly was questioned for having said that his ultimate loyalty always would be given to the realm of God's rule and that he would serve God even if it meant disobeying the law. Here was a man was about to assume an influential leadership role in a democratic republic not in a religious institution. Is that what we want for our government? And what if the nominee had been a Muslim or a Jew?

What about us? Should our response to every inconsistency between democracy and conformity to the teaching of Jesus be civil disobedience? And, do we commend the same response to people of other religions whose views stand in conflict with our nation's laws?

To this day, I remember the anger directed at me when, in 1976, planning for a bicentennial youth event in San Antonio, Texas, I asked the leaders of the conference to remove the American flag that they had hung right above the pulpit. The pulpit is a symbol of the authority of God's word. The flag is the primary symbol of our nation and its governmental authority. Both merit respect, but to place the authority of the nation over the authority of the word of God in a place of worship strikes me as irreverent and inappropriate heresy.

Do you believe that? Or, are your thoughts on this matter better represented by the woman who told her pastor, "I love my country more than I love my church."

Recently a friend said to me, "The cost of living in a democracy is that fidelity to the constitution trumps obedience to scripture." Perhaps your initial reaction to that statement is a vigorous denial. My friends' words knocked the breath out of me. But, think about it. Do we want the religions of this nation to preempt the governmental policies of this nation? Should we denounce every conflict between the ways of our nation and the teachings of scripture as we understand them, even if that means illegal behavior on our part and civil chaos in our world? And, would we offer that same counsel to Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, and others?

Thankfully, at its inception, our nation adopted a constitution that appreciates and honors the value of all religions, but insists that our government be secular in nature. Thus, we preserve the integrity of our government to help us deal with affairs of law and state, but we turn to God alone for help and guidance in the affairs of our lives.

Christian Discipleship and American Citizenship

Well, how did that feel—singing the National Anthem in the context of Christian worship? Personally, I have no memory of ever having done that before. And, to be honest, I must confess that I felt a bit of discomfort. I am not sure that the national anthem belongs in a service of worship any more than the great hymns of any faith belong in celebrations of the government. This matter of relating Christian discipleship and national citizenship is not an easy one, not if you take both seriously.

The Christian Scriptures are clear that Christians are to pervade every segment of life with calls for recognition of the sovereignty of Christ and the unquestioned obedience that sovereignty deserves. So, are we to be working to elect only Christian leaders and to make all governmental legislation a reflection of our interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount?

I remember the first time I experienced major tension in an election. In my first pastorate out of graduate school, a pastor friend wrote me a letter requesting that I support a member of his congregation whom he commended as a good Baptist and a faithful Christian. However, from all that I could discover, the Jewish candidate in that election was better educated, more tested, empowered by experience, and an over-all better candidate for the public office to be filled by the winner of the election. What was my obligation? Did my faith impose a responsibility to vote for the Christian? After all, are Christians not to make Jesus “Lord” over all of the earth? But, look, we are citizens as well as disciples. We have a responsibility to vote for the person we consider best qualified to serve in a public office. How do we resolve the tension between these two important responsibilities?

Ultimately, I supported the Jewish candidate using a medical dilemma as instructive. If I have to have heart surgery, I prefer the best heart surgeon in the world to take care of me. Toward a similar goal politically, my ultimate criterion of choice should not be whether one is an atheist or a Christian, but whether one is a skilled surgeon.

Revisionist historians continue to tell us that America was intended to be a Christian nation. That, my friends is a lie easily verified as such by a quick reading of what happened in the constitutional convention. To speak of the United States as a Christian nation is to err historically, theologically, politically, and pragmatically.

The adjective Christian and the noun nation no more go together theologically than do oil and water chemically; each is of a different substance. Read history. Every time attempts have been made to construct a Christian political entity, the result has been disastrous for government as well as for faith.

The founders had experience in this realm. That is why they intentionally structured a nation appreciative of religion but institutionally divorced from religion. One of the earliest confirmations of the founders’ resistance to the very idea of a Christian nation was a treaty with the Muslim government in control of the Barbary Coast along which pirates were attacking American merchant ships and plundering their cargo. The Treaty of Tripoli, which interestingly was written in Arabic, approved by President John Adams on November 4, 1796, and ratified by the United Senate on June 10, 1797—many of whom were the framers of the constitution. Article 11 of that treaty begins with these words: “As the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion.” Keep in mind that this document was written and affirmed by the people who had penned the Constitution and the First Amendment.

Everyone is better served by a secular nation that has a great appreciation for religion but refuses to allow religion or a lack of religion to be a criterion by which public services are distributed.

Religion is mentioned only once in the Constitution and this in Article 6 which forbids the application of a religious test to candidates for public office. This issue, alive presently in debates about Mitt Romney, was the object of great controversy in the Kennedy-Nixon election because of Kennedy's Roman Catholicism. Personally, I would like for every candidate for the United States to have to say what John Kennedy said in his conversation with a Baptist Ministers Conference in Houston, Texas. "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute . . . Whatever issue may come before me as President . . . I will make my decision in accordance . . . with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise. But if the time should ever come . . . when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office." No candidate for public office should say less and be acceptable to America's voters.

Though I readily give myself to citizenship in this nation, I know that my ultimate service involves participation in the work of God.

Majority Rule and Minority Rights

Matthew 25:37-40

Rights for minorities have never been secure in this nation, not even in the realm of religion. No sooner had the immigrants who came to these shores from England and Europe made a place for them selves among the indigenous Americans who were here when they arrived, they set in place the same violations of minority rights from which they had fled.

The lure of majoritarianism is strong. Those with power seem blind to the fact that a day could come when they would not be in power.

The United States Senate is the only house of government that is charged with protecting minority rights. That is the purpose of the filibuster. I roundly criticized Senate Republicans who wanted to do away with the filibuster to ignore the position of the minority and to confirm judges others held in question. Today, with the Republicans in the minority in the Senate, I hold the same position regarding the Democrats threatened intolerance of a filibuster. Any slippage in our commitment to minority rights signals erosion in our commitment to democracy.

How does our faith speak to this situation and how do we give political expression to biblical admonitions? It is no secret that presently we face a crisis situation because of the porous nature of our national borders and the embarrassing disarray of our policies on immigration. But the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that the way in which we treat a stranger is the way we treat God. Similarly, Jesus said that how we treat people in need is how we treat him. Are these fundamental principles in the Bible relevant to our policy on immigration?

Without question, Christians constitute the majority religion in this nation—by a wide margin about 85%). Does this mean that Christians should receive priority attention in efforts to shape our government? At least two Supreme Court justices have spoken openly of their support for local communities dealing with controversial religious issues respecting the majority religion. It is a frightening concept that stands in direct contradiction to the framers of the constitution who shaped a government known for minority rights.

How soon we forget! Christianity started as a minority religion—illegal in the Roman Empire. Baptists were a minority in this nation—jailed for not paying taxes to support the established church in the colonies. Now both are majorities here more infatuated with extending their power than with compassionately protecting minority rights.

Let me be even more specific. We have every right to gather in this house of worship and to sing “Lift high the cross” as a statement of our theology. But we have no right to use the government to help us force such a musical statement on other people. Rather, as good citizens, with unspoken religious motivations, we work so that every minority—whether defined by religion, gender, race, sexual orientation, or economic status—can be an integral part of a chorus whose music celebrates the rights of all people.

Nationalism and a Universal Vision

Isaiah 49:6

Today, one of the most severe tensions gnawing at the informed consciences of sensitive Christian patriots stems from conflict between American nationalism and the universal vision commended by God since creation. With the falling towers, the burning Pentagon, and the debris of plane that crashed in a field in Pennsylvania still pungent in our psyches, many among us favor isolationism. Close our borders, redo our news casts, get out of Middle East negotiations and let’s just take care of ourselves. Of course, such sentiment is as naïve in geo-politics as it is immoral from the perspective of Christianity, but it is understandable even as it is impossible.

Despite our national pride and confidence in our power, the United States cannot stand alone. Neither should it even try according to the values that push us into houses of worship.

Look at the matter theologically, biblically. The United States is not a chosen nation, a special people in the eyes of God. We are one nation among many, all of which are the same to God. God loves all people in the same manner and calls all nations to the same tasks—peace-making, providing justice, and assuring freedom. Our nation has the same responsibility for functioning as a good corporate citizen in

the international neighborhood as you and I have individually for being good citizens in this nation and the world.

A narrow nationalism blinds us to the motivation of self-aggrandizement, nurtures within our body politic an arrogant attitude of imperialism, and catapults us into a morally questionable militarism. It is time we got over making fun of people who believe the nation needs to fund a Department of Peace as well as a Department of Defense. As good citizens and good Christians, we have a responsibility to challenge the major historical shift in American foreign policy that elevates pre-emptive invasions into other sovereign nations to the status once given to a long-held and internationally understood doctrine of national defense. Can we glorify peace as we now glorify war? As I have suggested to you before, it is time for us to incorporate devotion to cooperation and a commitment to peace into state funerals, national songs, pledges of allegiance, and other governmental rituals and rites. No greater challenge confronts our nation today than that of being an arbiter of justice and an advocate for real peace. If not the representatives of our government, then the leaders of our different religions can rival the importance of establishing a new form of government through pivotal acts in 1776 and 1789 if, in 2007, we can facilitate international cooperation in a world that is divided into religious camps well armed and poised to parade as soldiers of God—whether among Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Jews overlooking the borders of Israel, or Christians committed to the principles of democracy in the United States. Can we negotiate a shift from the identity of enemies to recognition of each other as brothers and sisters?

The great Methodist leader John Wesley said it best when he declared, “I am a citizen of the world!” So are we all.

Political Expectation and Individual Decision

Philippians 1:27

I must be dead honest with you. The path to which I point you today is most often traveled with great loneliness. Politics seeks conformity in a nation that prizes diversity. Some people will understand any critique of the nation as an expression of hostility to the nation. Our loyalty will be questioned. Sadly, some people will find no conflict between their faith and their citizenship, assuming, I suppose, that the God of Creation is akin to the classic picture of a red-white-and-blue clad Uncle Sam.

Perhaps you struggle as I do. I want to see hungry people fed, but not by the federal government co-opting faith and pouring tax payers’ money into religious programs. For that stance, along with others, I have been charged with being opposed to helping the poor and a minister untrue to his faith. Actually, one of my most fulfilling moments in the nation’s capitol came in a closed door strategy

session in which 7 or 8 other religious leaders were called together to hear a request that we stay quiet on a piece of legislation that would fund the faith-based initiative at a pitiable small level. For staying quiet, we would receive a promise that neither the White House nor the Congress would try to move any more faith-based legislation in that term. Those making the request explained that the president badly needed a victory in this key domestic program and that a Democratic Senator and a Republican Senator had agreed to this plan to give the president what he wanted. The convener of the meeting then went around the room seeking each person's response. Yes, we'll stay quiet my colleagues said one after the other. Then it was my turn. "No," I said, "No deal. Preserving the Constitutional guarantee of religious freedom is more important than satisfying two Senators and pleasing the President. I understand your strategy, but if you go forward with it, I will see that members of The Interfaith Alliance oppose you." As we walked out of the room, the convener of the meeting smiled at me, "None of us expected you to agree; we respect that. Thank you."

I want candidates for public office to reflect faith, but I also want them true to the vision of this nation and the role religion should play in it. In recent weeks, people have looked aghast at my vociferous criticism of the program done by Jim Wallis, Sojourners, and CNN television. Under the guise of covering religion and elections, but inviting only the three leaders among Democrats seeking their party's nomination for the presidency, reporters asked totally inappropriate questions. To Hillary Clinton, Soledad Obrien posed the question, "What do you pray about?" To John Edwards: "What has been your greatest sin?" The constitution does not charge us to elect the "holy person of the year" but elect the CEO of the United States who will fulfill the responsibilities associated with the Oval Office without bias toward religion.

I am awed by the separation of powers in our government. That is why I am frightened beyond measure by this past week's Supreme Court ruling that places the Executive Branch of our government beyond the reach of citizens' challenges when it violates the First Amendment to the Constitution.

To lose religious liberty is to compromise the integrity of religion as well as to risk the loss of democracy. On this July Fourth, I will thank God for this nation and for the blessing of having been born a citizen of it. I will listen to the stirring music for marches from the Boston Pops or the National Symphony. I will be thrilled by other sights and sounds of celebration. But in my heart I will hurt some, worried that the civil rights and religious freedom for which I have given so much of my life are now being forsaken by people who don't understand and political leaders who prefer power and privilege to compliance with the constitution.

On the evening of my first day with The Interfaith Alliance, after a reception, Walter Cronkite took me aside to speak of his vision of the task that I had assumed. On few, if any days, since then have I not thought of his remarks to me. “At stake in the success of your work is nothing less than democracy as we have known it.”

As if curtained off in a voting booth, every one of us comes to those moments when we must decide whether to speak or stay quiet, to act or to walk away. I refuse to pass judgment on how others make decisions in such moments. Mine is the responsibility of examining the response of a Christian patriot wanting to be helpful to his nation and true to his faith. So prior to each decision, because of my faith, I breathe a prayer that goes something like “Precious Lord, Take my Hand.”

Prayer of Commitment

O God, keep us true to our faith and faithful in our citizenship that all may be freed. The issues before us are big. The consequences of how we handle these issues will alter history. O God, give us grace and give us glory that we fail not each other, our nation, our world, or you. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, may the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives bring honor to you, strength to our nation, comfort to those who grieve, help to those who hurt, and peace to our world. Amen.