

The Higher Patriotism

sermon digest

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Luke 20:20-26

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The New York Times ran an opinion piece last year for Independence Day “Is Our Patriotism Moral?” by Notre Dame philosophy professor Gary Gutting. Gutting describes his family tradition on July 4 of reading out loud the Declaration of Independence followed by raising a toast to the United States of America in which he confessed to holding back tears of pride at being an American. He also observed that our patriotic rituals can be problematic when they lead to denial of basic human rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—for people outside our group. For example, atheists are often excluded from the patriotic ingroup.

For years I periodically sat with a friend in Rotary who was quite open with me about his atheism. During “God bless America” he stood in silence and left off the “under God” phrase in the pledge of allegiance. When I was president of the club, he urged me to abandon the practice of prayer in our opening ritual, another point of exclusion and silence for him. Although we disagreed about the reality of God and the importance of religion, we were bound in friendship through many common commitments to issues of justice and peace; and it never occurred to me that he might be less of an American because he did not share my faith.

In the country that I love, I remember with embarrassment Roosevelt’s decision to incarcerate Japanese Americans in the 1940’s, Senator McCarthy’s program of guilt by association with supposed communists in the 1950’s, and the Jim Crow laws of racial segregation and the violence of the Civil Rights Movement—all in the name of patriotism. I was a pastor of a small congregation near Fort Knox during the Vietnam War. I recall the controversy over an escalating war, the generational divide between youth and parents, and “America, love it or leave it” stickers on the back of cars. A part of the learning curve for me was the discovery that *tolerance for difference* is not un-American. From the beginning, our nation has been a melting pot not only of races and religious beliefs, but of differing philosophies and political opinions. The strength of this nation has always been in the affirmation of diversity and the acceptance of freedom of thought and voice.

Professor Gutting cites the conversation in Plato’s *Republic* in which Socrates asks for the definition of justice. The exclusive answer, “helping your friends and harming your enemies,” began a centuries-long moral debate over the obligation of fair play with people outside our group. Gutting notes, “We have. . . often forgotten that the liberation of our own citizens is by no means complete. But none of this alters the fact that our governments have often worked and our soldiers died not just for our own freedom but for the freedom of all nations.” He concludes that “liberty and justice for *all*” is the high reach of the American ideal and that true patriotism must have a global vision far larger than the geographic boundaries of ours or any other nation.

A misplaced patriotism stands in conflict with higher moral values. The week leading to the arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—has been called “the week of disputation” because of the persistent inquisition in the temple led by Jewish leaders. The questions were accompanied by the interpretive comment, “in order to trap him.” The question of paying taxes to Caesar was an insider challenge to the popularity of Jesus with a goal, “to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor.” The question deliberately presented a dilemma. Saying “yes” to paying taxes to Caesar was in conflict with Jewish law. Saying “no” was in conflict with Roman law. There was no safe answer. Either way, Jesus was subject to arrest. Jesus asked to see a coin, then inquired, “Whose head and whose tittle does it bear?” A common practice in dealing with interrogation in the Gospels, Jesus answers the question with a question, reminiscent of an old Jewish joke, “Why does a Jew answer a question with a question?” The answer: “Why not?”

The critics acknowledged that the image on the coin was Caesar’s, and Jesus responded with the famous line, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” The critics are amazed and silenced by the shrewd avoidance of the trap, and we are left to wonder what this means for us.

In retrospect, the “disputations” have been characterized by some interpreters as “anti-Semitic,” always from Jewish leaders concerning the interpretation of Jewish religion. Roman taxes were oppressive and cruel, driving the vast majority of Jews into dire poverty, but even the possession of a Roman coin implied a violation of Jewish law against graven images. The coin not only contained an image of Tiberius Caesar;

he was called “son of god.” Every Jewish child knew the command, no graven image, no other gods besides Jahweh.

The story may well have served a concern of Christians at the time; i.e., the Gospels were written to show a subtle affirmation of Caesar and to avoid conflict with the Roman government. As Christianity moved out into the Empire and increasingly became a gentile religion, Christians were increasingly vulnerable to charges of being unpatriotic and disobedient. In Romans 13, Paul declared that rulers served the purpose of God for an orderly society and 1 Peter 2:16-17 admonishes Christians, “As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.” Blaming the Jews for the arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus may well have come from a shift of emphasis in the Christian community away from blaming the Romans, a rather unpatriotic gesture for an upstart religion of a questionable revolutionary root.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, “God & Caesar: The Image on the Coin,” interpreted this event in the story of Jesus in light of Jewish thought. The Talmud raises a question about Genesis 1, what is the image of God in which humans are created? The Talmud illustrates by reference to the image of Caesar on the coin. From the same mold, all coins look alike. But the Creator made humans in the divine image so that no two are the same, affirming both the diversity and the unity of humankind. Waskow suggests that the Jewish inquisition as well as the early church were probably aware of this teaching. So the reference to the image on a coin immediately recalled the image of God in human life. Thus, the final word of Christ was not just a slick escape from a trap but a call to acknowledge the higher patriotism of the image of God in humanity over the image of Caesar on a coin.

As a Baptist, I was drilled with the ultimate interpretation of this word from Christ as a call for separation of Church and state by distinguishing the just demands of government and religion. I rather doubt that in this passage Jesus was making prophetic judgments about the U.S. Bill of Rights or the call to religious liberty, although I like to think that the gospel affirms both human rights and religious liberty.

Patriotism should always be servant to truth and justice. Patriotism is love of country, based on the Greek root *patris*, the fatherland. The very word has an exclusive ring to it suggesting superiority for the home team. Depending on the context, we might mean we the Jews, we the Romans, we the Russians, we the English, or we the Americans—or in the extreme, we the Tennesseans, the Christians, the Baptists, or the Vols. We cannot escape the similarity of patriotic fervor with the team spirit of March Madness or the Super Bowl.

Every patriot must be aware of the danger of misplaced loyalty. Every tyrant in history has demanded absolute loyalty to the fatherland above all else. Hitler used the myth of Aryan supremacy along with hatred of Jews to reinforce his evil empire. The Nuremberg Trials following the War declared that loyalty to country and submission to authority was not a valid defence or justification for crimes against humanity. The My Lai Massacre in Vietnam led to court martial and restatement of the principle that soldiers in the field must answer to a higher justice than the orders given by a superior.

The value of personal dignity and freedom in our patriotic tradition and culture, “that all men [humans] are created equal,” is the mark that calls into question every existing government whether ours or theirs. The inhumanity of the Roman system as well as the periodic corruption in the Jewish system called for a higher patriotism in the time of Jesus; and I believe that no one would have been more opposed to the inhumanity and injustice that developed in the church of later centuries than Jesus himself. Jesus called his disciples to a higher loyalty, to a higher patriotism than could be defined by geography. Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God, the government of God above all of the governments of the world. Luke caught the spirit of the lesson taught by the coin. Originally Luke-Acts were one volume. Written by the same author and addressed to same Theophilus, Luke gives account of the word of Peter before the Sanhedrin. In response to the demand for silence, Peter followed the principle of Christ: “We must obey God rather than any human authority (5:29).”