

Christianity vs Patriotism



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Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 28: 1-11

28 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ² All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:

³ You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

⁴ The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

⁵ Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

⁶ You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

⁷ The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

⁸ The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.

⁹ The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in obedience to him. ¹⁰ Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. ¹¹ The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity—in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground—in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.

Psalm 33: 12-15

- ¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
¹³ From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind;
¹⁴ from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
¹⁵ he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.

The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today in the United States we celebrate Independence Day. It is the day we celebrate the birth of the U.S. as an independent nation. Happy 4th of July!

The scriptures for today speak about nations. In our first scripture reading we see a covenant that Moses made with the people of Israel near the end of his time with them in the wilderness. It is known as the Mosaic Covenant, but I call it the 'if' 'then' covenant. For Moses, he certainly felt that 'if' the Israelites did everything according to the ways of God 'then' their nation would have God's blessings. A very rule driven way of thinking of God's interaction with nations but the idea is that loyalty to God comes first.

The psalmist also promoted the idea that nations who honor God are the nations that will be blessed. Don't we all want our nation to be blessed? Notice that their idea was again based on loyalty to God, not to country.

Certainly, those of us who live in the United States are blessed. One of the many blessings and privileges we enjoy is the freedom to worship God and to live out our understanding of faith. Does being blessed mean that everything is perfect – no – in the United States we have the freedom to speak up and to advocate for injustices that we see.

In the past several years, we have been hearing a word used to describe a person or persons who are thought to be most faithful to this country. That word is patriot. I remember the first time that the use of this word struck me. It was in June of 2017 when in Alexandria, Virginia a Republican Congressman Steve Scalise was severely wounded by a gunman at a baseball field where he and other congressmen were playing ball. Post this incident I recall Congressman Scalise described as a "patriot and a fighter".

Describing this congressman as a patriot created in me a real curiosity. How was the term patriot being used? As I continued to hear persons described as patriots, I wondered even more how the term patriot was being used and I wondered if a person can be a patriot and a Christian?

I began my study by looking into patriotism. My reference was a well-done bible study by Dr. Edward LeRoy Long Jr, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics at Drew University in New Jersey. Here are some ideas that Dr. Long had to say when describing patriotism:

Patriotism is described as one of the strongest forms of allegiance to one's nation, a zealous devotion to its welfare with a loyalty to government as defined by the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics. Patriotism includes many factors such as:

- Typically, patriotism confines one's commitment to one nation and one land. It is the place where we call home and reap the benefits of being a citizen.
- Patriotism involves language. Most nations give one language a central role –in the United States English is the central language although the U.S. is one of those nations where various languages are spoken. Language is an instrument of identity. If you have traveled and been in places where the language you speak is not the predominate language it can make one feel that we are the outsider. Speaking the native tongue can be a way of saying that one identifies with a particular nation.
- Patriotism involves ethnicity. Some nations are more culturally monolithic. The US is a melting pot - a nation known for welcoming people from other countries. Most of us can name our heritage from where our ancestors immigrated from giving us various ethnic allegiances. For me, my mother's side of the family came from Germany in the late 1800's. Ethnic diversity is meant to be a strength of patriotism. See a statement that every new citizen of the U.S. receives:

Welcome to the United States

A Guide for New Immigrants

Congratulations on becoming a permanent resident of the United States of America! On behalf of the President of the United States and the American people, we welcome you and wish you every success here. The United States has a long history of welcoming immigrants from all parts of the world. America values the contributions of immigrants who continue to enrich this country and preserve its legacy as a land of freedom and opportunity. As a permanent resident of the United States, you have made a decision to call this country your home.

As you work to achieve your goals, take time to get to know this country, its history, and its people. It is now both your right and your responsibility to shape the future of the United States and to ensure its continued success. Exciting opportunities await you as you begin your life as a permanent resident of this great country. Welcome to the United States!

From: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

- Patriotism is related to ideology where people share certain ideas and commitments to a country such as the freedoms that we cherish. Some may share an ideology that our nation is the strongest militarily. In our nation the President is referred to as the leader of the free world, so in the U.S. we share an ideology that our President provides leadership to other democracies so that the U.S. along with other nations hold the values of being a democracy in common.

Patriotism involves commitment, language, ethnicity, and shared ideologies. We see patriotism at its best in our country when people come together for a common cause – such as helping people when 9/11 happened or when the building collapsed recently in Surfside, Florida. It is also shown when people serve their country in the military or in their cities through civil service or even by serving in the Peace Corp.

In the U.S. we see patriotism as honoring our government – not that the government is perfect – but that we work together through public discourse to be sure that the government serves the general welfare of our nation. Patriotism can motivate altruism and philanthropic activities which can help

to build understanding between people groups and strengthen both the education of our children and the communities we live in.

Patriotism in the U.S. includes the freedom and ability to scrutinize and to work for justice. The freedom to share our opinions openly with our senators, congressmen, and women and even with our President is a freedom that we enjoy in our country. I want you to hear that disagreeing with our President or leaders does not preclude one from being a patriot.

In each one of these depictions of patriotism, we see where our faith as Christians fits well, such as:

- Welcoming the immigrant, knowing that our ancestors were immigrants. Very biblical to be welcoming to strangers.
- Christians help one another in moments of crisis.
- Christians honor service to others and to those who support our cities and our nation.
- Christians pray for the leaders of their cities and country as part of our commitment to our nation. We stay involved in government so that Christian values of caring for the stranger, taking care of widows and orphans and many other Christian values remain strong.
- As a Christian, I feel grateful every day to be living in the United States and to claim the state of Michigan as my home, however, as a Christian I see the land, the lakes, and the skies as all belonging to God and not to a nation. I see the land in every nation as a gift given to humanity by God and I see a responsibility to care for God's creation. For me, this fits in with being a patriot as I see patriots as people who will make sure that we will not deplete our national resources, that we find alternatives to our sources of power so that we can use power efficiently and in ways that don't contribute to the decline of land, water or air and that we work to take care of not only this country but the world because it belongs to God.

So when could being a Christian run aground with being a patriot? Certainly, it has everything to do with how one would define being a Christian and being a patriot.

Reinhold Niebuhr shared his concerns about the immorality that can take place within societies putting Christians at odds with their nations in his book entitled, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Niebuhr's concern for any society was when group purposes become immoral, and group enthusiasm prompts larger sects of society to behave in ways that our faith would say is not acceptable. Likely you can think with me of several ways that our faith in God and seeking to live Godly principles conflict with others who sense of patriotism has led them to do great harm and even kill others throughout the history of this country.

It makes me think of Dr. Martin Luther King who penned a letter to his 'fellow clergymen' from a Birmingham jail. These 'fellow clergymen' wanted to give more time before taking any steps to end segregation in this nation and King was calling them to biblical truths and the letter was a call to action.

Recently my husband and I watched a PBS documentary on Billy Graham. Graham was a great friend to President Richard Nixon and knew several of the Presidents. Graham sought to bring his Christian ideals right to the office of the President which later he regretted doing. In a 2011 interview with *Christianity Today*, Graham said, "I ... would have steered clear of politics. I'm grateful for the opportunities God gave me to minister to people in high places; people in power have spiritual and personal needs like everyone else, and often they have no one to talk to. But looking back, I know I sometimes crossed the line, and I wouldn't do that now." Whether we agree with Billy Graham and the ways he was involved with past presidents or not he loved his country and his God and at times thought he was doing the right thing. He could see later in life that being a Christian can put us at odds with our government and politicians.

Christians seek truth. We believe that the bible holds truths for our lives. As Christians, sometimes it is difficult to know the difference between propaganda and truth which is why we are encouraged to for the Spirit of God to give us a spirit of discernment – to be open to hearing truth even when the truth may be painful to hear. Christians can be viewed as being unpatriotic if we don't adhere to a group. It is why it is important as

Christians to look at the values that are intrinsic to any group and hold them in the light of God's word and God's teachings to us.

Dr. Long in his study wrote that "the most patriotic thing that Christians can do is to seek to prevent the noble qualities of patriotism from becoming the demonic qualities of nationalistic idolatry". What does Edward Long mean? He means that as Christians we value our country, but our value of our country should not become the most important object of our loyalty. Our loyalty first belongs to God. Christians acknowledge the importance of institutions but also recognize the importance of holding these same institutions responsible for its behaviors and decisions. Long sees a tension between supporting our leaders and institutions and holding them in the light of what we believe God leads us to do. This is never easy and there should always be a tension between the two. We saw this in the times of Jesus where the power of Rome was feared. People wanted to follow Christ but were always in tension with groups who saw things differently.

I will tell you that I declare myself to be both a Christian and a Patriot. Even if the word patriot gets used in ways that are incongruent with the original meaning of the word, I am still going to claim the title and put the word patriot back in its rightful noble place. Can I be a Christian and a Patriot? Yes indeed, however, my allegiance will remain to God and my holding of the United States as my home, my nation means that I will use my own Christian values in directing my own "*responsibility to shape the future of the United States and to ensure its continued success*".

Let us pray: *Holy God, we thank you for our nation. We thank you for the freedoms we enjoy as we celebrate our independence. Today, we also pray for our nation and for its leaders. Tensions remain high between political parties and we witness lots of groups who want to see the nation of the United States go in different directions. Our country feels very divided rather than united. Lord, we pray for all other nations as well as you don't see us as citizens of nations but citizens of your kingdom. Help us, even as we celebrate our own country today to be mindful of your children and the struggles they have in every country. In Jesus name, Amen*

