

Patriotism: Will it Preach?

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Once again, sweet summertime rolls around. It's that wonderful time of year for series sermons, long-awaited vacation, guest preachers, smaller congregations, and the triennial tour of the Gospels (thanks to the lectionary). The preacher either relaxes into (or plods through) "ordinary time" and the congregation loyally follows along—or simply goes on vacation (mentally or physically) until what they perceive as the "real church year starts up again in September. We just begin to settle in for our summer siesta, however, when along comes the Fourth of July. It happens every year, obviously, nonetheless we find ourselves in the perennial dilemma: What does one do with the Fourth of July? That is to say, what shall I preach from the pulpit on a weekend of a national holiday?

There are several opinions on the subject. Having sat or participated in many a holiday weekend worship service, I've discovered that the tendencies seem to range from avoiding the weekend altogether to overwhelming the service with everything red, white, and blue. Sadly, I have yet to walk away from one of these services without some confusion regarding what exactly is meant by service to one's God and one's country.

To the drawing board then. First we must take into consideration some of the factors involved. As already mentioned, unless it is a resort community, there will be a pretty low attendance that day as many families take advantage of the holiday for their vacation time or family reunions. Those who do come to church include both the "regulars" as well as the visitors who may or may not be comfortable in church, let alone familiar with the pastor and his or her approach to issues. This first consideration is key to the second and that is—what is the congregation ready to receive? The congregation (regulars and visitors) are probably a mixed batch of those who want a sermon dealing with God and our country, a "thinking" sermon, and those who are waiting for a definition of a "good American"—a sermon which simply presents ideas that do not require much energy to hear and understand. (After all—this is vacation time!) And then there are the members of the congregation who have no specific expectations but who are ready to receive anything or nothing regardless of what is presented that day.

The options then are several. We can follow the lectionary and not refer to the Fourth of July, but some in our congregations will feel that an important national event has been ignored. To appease them, we could brush over the issue with that old-favorite "patriotic" hymn like the ones we learned in grade school, or for more church-like flavor, something like "Faith of our Fathers/Parents." Or we could use the pastoral prayer in the same manner and make some reference to the holiday. Or perhaps we might slip in an allusion to freedom or the War of Independence somewhere within the service. Of course, we

could address the national holiday head-on with a carefully thought-out sermon on the Christian approach to patriotism. Though we may resist that last option, it is the most needed, lest we give the message that the church will have nothing to do with the state or that it will only skate over the issue with syrupy sentimentality. But will it preach? Can we actually stand up in the pulpit and give a sincere, thought-provoking sermon on patriotism? It is not only a question of the congregation's readiness but of the topic itself. What can be said about patriotism from the pulpit that offers a God-centered view, that challenges the Church and its members to think and act in faith—even while on vacation?

Our difficulty lies first in the definition of patriotism. The varying approaches pastors make to holiday weekends probably reveal the different understandings held regarding patriotism. The definitions range from a) putting America first, as it is superior to all other countries; to b) having enough national spirit so that we will be ready for anything, especially war; to c) being a good American, the kind of person who flies Old Glory regularly and has American eagles prominently displayed throughout the house; to d) believing in our country and pledging our allegiance to it. The picking and choosing of what patriotism is has left our congregations confused and still searching for the final word.

None of these attitudes define patriotism and yet all reflect individual expressions thereof. To understand patriotism is to set aside the externals and reach to the heart of the matter. For instance, to define patriotism for the sake of argument, let it be said that it is "a self-forgetting passion which identifies the individual with the whole past and future of [that individual's] country or race and can be expressed only in devotion and service."¹

Therein lies the initial difficulty: preachers attempt to address the issue by working with the symptoms and not the cause, the expressions and not the emotion. We associate the expressions of patriotism as its definition and thus cause confusion and further misunderstanding. By preaching how a person should act if he or she is "truly" patriotic, we fail to address the reasons why a person is patriotic in the first place. If the congregation is never led to the whys of the emotion then they will feel, at worst, assaulted when told that certain outward signs equal the "true" feeling, and will feel at best, unmoved and unchallenged when the sermon leaves them as ignorant to patriotism as they were before.

I am not sure I have ever felt comfortable with these outward signs, that is to say, with things "patriotic." A quick glance to the by-line of this article and the reader will discover that because of this I have probably found myself in an awkward position a few times due to my position as a military chaplain. Writing this article has helped me to discover why. Since patriotism is an emotion, and we have gone as far as to say a passion, then it is personal, strong and deep, and, like most emotions, not just a little mysterious. It stems from a person's heart and experience and therefore, from that person's own conscience. If one becomes attached to the land in which he or she lives, then that person is predisposed to the personal feelings which arise from that attachment. I will be the first to say that I love my country as much as others love

theirs. I have chosen to express my love in a certain manner, therefore, according to our definition I, too, am patriotic. Trouble arises when the expression of one person's devotion is imposed on another person's feelings. If the feelings are expressed differently, does that make one or the other any more or less patriotic? Of course not, but when we as preachers are encouraging certain examples of behavior over others, perhaps then we are denying the feelings of those who choose to express their feelings differently. Until now it has been difficult for me to accept the concept of patriotism simply because I have associated it with the feeling of being forced to express it the way everybody else did. Are we from the pulpit endorsing this socialized molding of "American patriots" simply by restating the party line of certain behavior, or worse, avoiding to address the issue when national holidays roll around our Sunday worship? Are we making our congregations uncomfortable with things "patriotic" by telling them how they should feel and how they should act if they are "true" patriots?

We return to the heart of the matter which is the cause of our emotions both collectively and individually. With what do we identify and to what do we attach ourselves that create feelings for (or for that matter against) our country or race? The answers to these questions point to the real catalyst for national celebrations and perhaps, therefore, to the source of sermons addressing these celebrations.

From the day we are born, we are attached to something. Whether or not we remain with our biological parents, who they are or were directly impacts who we are or will be. Did either of them have red hair? Were they patient, jolly people? Will he be tall like his mother or short like his father? Which parent does she resemble? The questions go on as our identity, present and future, is assessed based on our relationship to our family. As we grow older we choose to allow that identification to have bearing on who we are and would like to be. As we grow older our identities expand as our world does. What school does she attend? Who does he "hang around" with? We are identified with our peer groups and then our cities/towns and even eventually our states. (We know from *Prairie Home Companion* that Minnesotans have a language all their own. And everybody knows that anyone who comes from Texas likes big things!) As we become aware of the larger picture, we discover that it has some impact on who we are or are not, and who we will or will not choose to become.

The progression is obvious. We are eventually identified with the country in which we live or from which we come. To say, "I am an American" draws instant images in the minds of the hearers. But what makes a person an American patriot? Technically, a person is an American who is born on American soil or who has lived here long enough and has taken and passed the test for citizenship. But those who declared independence from the Old World were the first patriots and yet many had neither been born anywhere near here nor had taken any exams. To return to our definition: to be a patriot a person must identify with the whole past and future of a country. Whether we are born here and choose to remain, or if we arrive and are welcomed with immigration papers, our identify as a patriot has a great deal to do with how we identify and

attach ourselves to this country and why.

As our vision is expanded our values and beliefs are added into the equation of our chosen identity. We were taught early in our education that the people who left Britain (as well as other countries) did so because they could no longer live under the British rule which sought to regulate their religious beliefs and thus also govern their values. America, or the New World, represented for them the land which would welcome their religious freedom. It was unexplored territory (as far as they knew), it had no formal government (yet), and it would welcome settlers who sought the freedom it offered. For those people who ventured here then, and those people who continue to flock to America's shores, as well as those who have been born and raised here and consciously choose to remain, to live as an American patriot is to claim the promise of freedom this country has offered and offers still. The pride, or the passion, which develops from this attachment is a matter of our identity with this country, its values and its opportunities. Other countries naturally have their patriots. There are people worldwide who love their countries. The feeling described causes a person to dedicate her or his energies, service, and entire life to preserve the land, its heritage, and its future. Simply believing in one's country and giving service to it, however, can be taken one step too far. Tolstoy is quoted as saying, "there is not, and there never has been a combined act of violence by one set of people against another set of people which has not been perpetrated in the name of patriotism."² The operative words there are "in the name." Patriotism is an intimate attachment, not a reasoned belief that one imposes on others or argues about. Therapists and group-dynamics leaders world-round assure us that "feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are." Therefore, I have no right to fight others over their feelings if they differ from mine and naturally, the reverse is true. When it becomes an issue not of feelings but logical conclusions based on facts and figures and reasoned thought, we are no longer dealing with patriotism but something very different, nationalism. The concept of "my country is better than yours" comes into play, as we start adding up the qualities, measuring basic premises, and begin the comparing.

Nationalism stems from the feeling of patriotism but as it begins to figure its tally against other nations, the emotion is set aside and reasoned belief takes over. We become lost in being "an American" and cannot appreciate the feelings another person may have for his or her homeland. As far as we are concerned, the facts indicate that America is by far the best nation. Nationalism may be derived from patriotic pride, but it then moves further to issue demands as a result of that feeling. Perhaps this is what I have heard from the pulpit and what many young people in the turmoil of the sixties spoke out against—a nationalism that developed into a selfish, self-regarding evil expressed in hatred against other nations.³

An even greater danger is that the arrogance regarding one's nation over and against other nations sometimes develops into the arrogance of one's nation over one's God. The apology offered is that God loves this nation above all others, therefore, if I worship this nation, I worship God. But in fact, if we worship our nation, we ignore our God. Our center of worship and our driving

force is self-centered and not God-centered. When patriotism develops in a "master motive in human lives," making demands for activity which "exalt a [person] in the love of his [/her] own country at the cost of hating other countries," it has progressed (or regressed) into a destructive [and Godless] form of nationalism.⁴

In recognition of individual conscience and judgment, patriotism cannot be made the exclusive property of any class, group, or school of thought.⁵ Were this not true, then patriots would only be found in one country among only a certain group of people. But instead, there are patriots worldwide who love their countries and take great pride in their existence regardless of political stance or philosophy. Stephen Decatur's statement, "Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!"⁶, intended simply as a toast has become used and abused in the years since. Yet it says what many, including Jane Fonda, misunderstood, "I wish our government to be right, but regardless of its right or wrong policies, my allegiance to my country, to its ideals, to the promises it holds, to the hopes, and to its welfare and that of its inhabitants, remains strong." An Englishman, Chatham, in reference to the war with the colonies, was opposed to it because he believed that his country was engaged to the hurt of its good name.⁷ Even some of the Vietnam protests were patriotic when one observes that many of the protestors were not anti-country, but anti-government. They protested the war and America's involvement in it. They spoke against those who placed America in that situation, saying, in effect, "It's not only their country but our country as well!"⁸ Their actions, too, as much as those of the soldier, marine, or sailor who fought, were in response to their love of country.

Nathan Hale speaks the sentiment of all patriots, "I have but one life to lose for my country"—not George Washington or any president or the Continental Congress or any governing body—but my country and the ideals upon which it is established. Patriotism in many respects is not only nationalism's corrective, inasmuch as it allows a person to love one's country and does not allow itself to be imposed on other people, but it is also the nation's conscience. As the nation is comprised of many different people who call this country their own, there will be many voices. Yet the voices which, in all love and honesty, speak to protect our country and its premises, must be heard, lest we promote single-minded allegiance to the state, that is, totalitarianism, a close-minded and wicked form of nationalism which leaves no room for the personal and individual expression of patriotism.

How then is patriotism best expressed? Our definition claims that patriotism can be expressed only in devotion and service. The mind quickly conjures up the patriot who rushes off to war, fully armed, devoted to country and to its service. For some reason, maybe because within the last century war has touched almost every household in some way or another, we have been trained to equate service with military service. It cannot be denied that there are many patriots who have fought in military battles with their love of country as their motivation. "The blood-stained annals of human warfare are half-redeemed by the examples of men, and women too, who have thrown away all that is deemed to make life happy, and even life itself, for their country's sake."⁹

Indeed, many a contribution has been made through military service and of those people who have fought in these wars, many have done so, devoted to ensuring that their country and its ideals are preserved. Yet patriots are not only among the men and women of our military force. "The roof of patriotism in states[person], soldier, lawyer and business-[person] alike, is the unhesitating and self-forgetting readiness to subordinate personal and family and all other interests to the community's call for service."¹⁰ The selfless dedication and the movement to devotion and service, not just in terms of military service, are essential.

There is not one person who is truly a patriot who does not wish to express that emotion somehow. Patriotism is by our definition a feeling which calls a person to action to care and tend to that which is cherished. Because of the love one has for country, there is the readiness to make sacrifices for what one deems its best interests.¹¹ The service that is rendered for one's country is motivated by love and has a constructive purpose for the building up and improving of the welfare of the country and its inhabitants.

To speak a message of patriotism also involves moving on even further and making the identification not only to our country but to the rest of the world and God's creation. Patriotism for us as Americans is an expression of what we in this country have indicated as our top priorities from Day One: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We are united simply by our allegiance to these ideals. Not only do we share the land upon which we live, but we share a cause and a hope to preserve these priorities, these ideals, upon which a nation was established. Because we believe strongly in these rights, we hope to be an example, as individuals and as a country, to the rest of the world that they may understand the bases upon which we have built and continue to order our government. We are not isolated in enjoying the freedoms, hopes, and dreams our country is built on. These are natural rights belonging to all people.

Perhaps the question which needs most to be addressed from the pulpit and in our own personal studies is, from whence do our ideals, which we believe to be essential to our life as Americans, stem? From where have we determined these rights and freedoms? Early Christendom itself understood our definition of patriotism. The foundation of its allegiance was the Church, which extended beyond political lines. The desire to "keep yourselves in the love of God" established the boundaries for their "country." To push those boundaries was to evangelize, to share the Christian ideals with the rest of the world and to enrich humanity with the understanding of Christ and Christ's Church. There was no Jew or Greek, slave or free. They lived under the realm of God which was governed by God's law which taught them how to appreciate righteousness, generosity, and humility.

By the time of the Reformation, however, those ideals were no longer sentiments, but mere words. Christ's Church was undermined and subdued by the state. National lines were drawn, fought for, and established. Boundaries were built according to the desire for power and national superiority. The nation took the place of God and true patriotism was replaced by the self-worship of nations. The movement to the New World emerged and its intent was to reestablish the priority of Christ's reign. From the beginning we chose to be under

God: God's first, Americans second. We established our country as a result of our love for God. Our nation was formed under God that we would be governed by him.

The struggle we face is that we tend to forget the foundation for our allegiance. Where we once were firm to state, "In God we trust," for in him is our strength, we now find ourselves saying, in effect, "in us we trust." We have lost sight of God and God's will for our country, in God's place are ourselves and our own interests. Our ideals have become watered down, our God-centeredness is weakening, and our self-centeredness attempts to take its place. A destructive nationalism takes root and once again seeks to undermine our patriotism, the love of freedom, and of God, upon which we were founded.

As we lose touch with our ideals, then we eventually lose sight of the responsibility we hold to care for others, including our own. If we look within our own country, there are those within our cities, in Appalachia, in Alaska, who do not know the freedom and opportunity we claim to be integral to our country. Our self-worship has overcome the notion of selfless service of God and our land. Needless to say, if we are not reaching out to our own people, we are surely neglecting to share our original priorities with the rest of the world.

We as Christians know the danger involved in ignoring the needs of our country and then our world. We realize that we can actualize ourselves "as humans, [as God's created image], only as [we] exercise [our] capacity for establishing moral communities in which diverse peoples can associate with dignity, self-respect, independence and peace."¹² Our responsibility is not simply for ourselves, but for our ideals and for all people. If we are bound by national or state lines, we neglect God's purpose. "Those who [choose] to remain in bondage to entitlements derived either from their place of origin or from some other natural condition such as gender, race, religion, or nation, fail to actualize their human potentialities."¹³

Edith Cavell, a woman who died for her country, believed that patriotism is not enough. She is described as a person who looked beyond patriotism, her love of country and its members, to a love which reached out to all humanity. She believed that her patriotism taught her the way to selfless devotion for all people.¹⁴ Perhaps that also is what we need spoken from our pulpits, particularly in the United States where we base our patriotism on values and God-given rights, such as freedom, life, and justice. To preach and encourage those values is not a matter of promoting our nation, neither is it a means of broadcasting our country as being the only recipient of these gifts. We are fortunate, blessed, that we live in a land where these gifts are evident and are the foundation upon which we have built our nation. In the words of a familiar hymn, indeed "God has shed God's grace on us." But the "heroes" are those who not only "love country more than self" but who sacrifice their lives for God that God's mercy may be known by all people. We must start in our own country and foster the spirit of our forebears "across the wilderness." Our work does not rest solely between our shining seas. The service we pledge to our country, our patriotism, must be a stepping stone, a starting point, for the service we owe to all of God's creation to share the good news of God's grace.

When the subject of patriotism arises perhaps we lean toward avoidance

because we ourselves are not clear what it is we hope to preach. Maybe the question we then need to ask ourselves is, how is our own patriotism defined? On what do we base it? How do we express that personal feeling through service to God and country? In other words, how do we practice our own patriotism? Once we have answered these questions then we can determine how to preach patriotism.

Will it preach? Surely there will be mixed reactions. Regardless of the time of year, patriotism is, as already noted, a personal subject. National holiday or not, we must explain patriotism so that it is no longer confused with any one particular expression or belief. It should be understood that patriotism is a feeling based on values such as life and liberty. Only then can we appeal to a congregation's sense of patriotism and love of country in order to challenge them to share that love and serve their God wherever they are. Patriotism leads to service and to the preservation of that which a person believes is the basis of that love. As Christians we believe those qualities upon which we have built our country to be of God, not exclusive to any one country but available to all people. They are to be lived, preserved, shared and promoted worldwide, because all people are God's. Since the message is God's then it can't help but preach if the church is challenged to hear and to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Chances are if the minister has been faithful in preparing the congregation year round, it will be ready and waiting to hear God's Word—even on a holiday weekend.

Perhaps the question that remains then is not, "Patriotism: will it preach?" but "Will we preach it?"

NOTES

¹ Sir Basil Blackett, N.P. MacDonald, eds., *What is Patriotism?* (Great Britain: Chapel River Press, 1935), 72.

² Leo Tolstoy, "Christianity and Patriotism," *The Kingdom of God and other Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1936).

³ Blackett, *What is Patriotism?*, 74.

⁴ The Rt. Rev. J.E.C. Welldon, D.D., N.P. MacDonald, eds. *What is Patriotism?* (Great Britain: Chapel River Press, 1935), 33.

⁵ John J. Pullen, "God and Country," *Patriotism in America: A Study of Changing Devotions 1770-1970* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971), 21.

⁶ Toast, Norfolk, Virginia, April, 1816.

⁷ Blackett, *What is Patriotism?*, 76.

⁸ Pullen, "God and Country," 19.

⁹ Welldon, *What is Patriotism?*, 32.

¹⁰ Blackett, *What is Patriotism?*, 78.

¹¹ Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1946.

¹² Peter J. Paris, *Expanding and Enhancing the Moral Communities: The Task of Christian Social Ethics*, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, New Series, vol. 7, no.2 (1986), 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Blackett, *What is Patriotism?*, 78.