

Protagonist Corner

Flags and Faithfulness

Deuteronomy 5:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22

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One hundred times each week under spacious skies, hemmed in between crowded smokestacks in dingy neighborhoods, or on silent, sweltering hilltops adjacent to small villages; at least a hundred times each week, after the benediction is pronounced beside the grave and the religious service concludes, a minister or priest steps aside, and two military personnel in uniform, or two undertakers, step forward, and with carefully prescribed protocol, lift the American flag from the casket. They start to fold it, always beginning at the end with the red and white stripes, and folding toward the blue field of white stars which represent the fifty states, firmly, meticulously tucking in the last fold until the flag is a compact triangle. Then one of them presents the flag to the next of kin, most often a widow or a mother, but sometimes a husband, a sister, or daughter. And the ceremony is finished.

If you've been witness to that ceremony very often, you've come face to face with the power of the United States flag, not only as a symbol for our nation, but also as a personal treasure in the life of the deceased and his family: representing service, loyalty, courage, exemplary citizenship, devotion to duty, risk of life and sometimes the sacrifice of a life for the sake of the nation. At such a ceremony you come face to face with that which connects us personally to the ideals and the values of this nation, and to the constitutional guarantees which protect our freedoms.

Yet even as we acknowledge the power of the flag, as Christians we also know its limits and finitude, especially when we gather before the Lord's table, whose boundaries are infinite in all directions: a table without limits, which may never be defined by race or national origin, nor contained by any single historical epoch. The words of Moses to the people of Israel concerning the Torah, the law, given as gracious gift of God to the slaves in order that they might become a people; the words of Moses apply likewise to us, gathered here before this gracious gift of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today (Deut. 5:3).

Communion Sunday, just two days before the 214th anniversary of the American revolution, is an especially appropriate occasion for us to wonder together about the inflamed debate that rages among us as citizens about our flag, and the respect or disrespect given to it; an opportunity to think about religious freedom and Christian faith; about what Caesar may justly require, and what God sometimes requires in spite of Caesar, and about what scripture teachers with regard to citizenship, and idolatry.

Certainly we may be clear: neither your eternal destiny nor mine is jeopardized in the slightest by whether we oppose or favor a constitutional amendment which requires us to treat the flag with respect. Unless, of course, our faith, which once took full wind and sailed swiftly toward God, has gone still, lifeless, listless, and becalmed. And in that empty, gnawing hunger our hearts have replaced devotion to the living God, with a too ardent reverence for our nation and its symbols, turning the American eagle into a golden calf, and making the flag its icon.

It happens. And then we lose the capacity to make the distinction, and trade (not in any one, single negotiation, but slowly, over the years) trade our trust, body and soul, in the infinite, for faith in that which is merely and finally finite. If that is our situation, then our eternal destiny and our faith may well need renegotiation.

For you shall have no other gods before me, says God. The danger in idolatry (or apostasy) is not our tendency to question with our minds whether there is more than one god, or to doubt whether God exists at all. No, the danger lies in our giving inappropriate devotion and reverence to that which is merely finite, yet which may well have power in itself to inspire us, to call forth our best efforts, and to galvanize our strengths and virtues for the common good.

When God gave the law at Sinai and Moses repeated the law again to Israel on Jordan's stormy banks, the issue at stake was not a debate between monotheism on the one hand and polytheism on the other. Rather it was a question of ultimate fealty, ultimate loyalty. Will you give your trust, body and soul, to the One who came seeking you while you were still slaves in Egypt, and found you; bound you to the divine purpose, carried you across the desert, and remained faithful even when you lost faith and gave your trust to the golden calf, and doubted the divine promise?¹ Will you give your trust and devotion to the One who is holy, like whom there is no other, or will you place your trust and devotion in that which is merely passing away?

After all, we may give thanks to God for this nation and its symbols, the flag and the eagle, and for our revolution, and constitution; for our freedoms to speak and worship, to speak that which is unpopular, even disturbing, to the government. As Christians we are obliged (not required by the state, but by the teaching of our faith) to respect and obey the just laws of this land which promote the common good; and, if we are able, to work for laws and programs which protect and defend (not only the rich and powerful, not only the church itself) but the rights and justice of all the people. We are obligated as Christians to be good citizens, which is the way we render unto Caesar that which is appropriately Caesar's in a democratic republic. But we may not place our trust and devotion, body and soul, in this nation and its symbols, or give more than respect to our flag.

There is ceaseless conversation, currently, about saving the flag from desecration. But a flag cannot be desecrated, for it has never been sacred, that is, holy. Holiness belongs to God alone and to the things of God. We can desecrate the Lord's table, but not the flag. And in this nation (not all nations, but this nation) nothing political like a flag has been consecrated, or made sacred.

A flag is not holy.²

Betsy Ross, you see, with needle, thread, and thimble, and with bits of colored cloth, fashioned a flag for a newly founded nation, a nation fragile and tenuous in a world of raw imperialism and claims that kings ruled by divine right.

Generations before, God took wood and nails, the apostasy and blindness of Israel's leadership, the fear of a Roman governor, the cries of a bloodthirsty crowd, and the faithful obedience of his only begotten Son, and saved a world, calling together into one communion men and women from all the nations of the earth.

Francis Scott Key rejoiced to see, through the flashing light of bursting bombs, that our flag still flew on the ramparts, and that our fledgling nation had not fallen again to the British oppressors. Francis Scott Key sang that the flag was flying from the twilight's last gleaming to the dawn's early light. Yet by that recognition, joyous as it was, came also the sobering realization that while national existence, like all of history, is in the hands of almighty God, it is a finite and human accomplishment, based on human wisdom, and grit, and intelligence, and the power of the sword. Francis Scott Key sang that our flag had lasted for a night.

Yet we sing of a God in whose sight a thousand ages is but an evening gone, and before whom countless generations and nations have risen and passed away. We sing of a God who is from everlasting to everlasting, who is our dwelling place in all generations, who existed before the mountains were brought forth, or the earth had been formed.

And thousands and thousands of times each week, in storefronts, in cathedrals set upon hills, in rooms hidden away for fear of secret police, in quiet summer churches, out of doors at church campgrounds, beside huts in villages, and in prisons; thousands of time each week with Americans and Chinese, Russians and Cubans, Brazilians, Sandanistas and Contras, even Albanians, in places where the word has been preached, ministers and priests step forward and invite those gathered to take bread and wine with words that reach back to the apostle Paul. And the gathered company shares the feast to which we have been invited in memory of Christ's life and death, for his real presence in the power of the Spirit, to seal the promise of forgiveness, and to claim the power of his coming again.³ Thousands of times each week, ministers and priests, and the people of God step forward to the table of the Lord, and bless and break and pour, and eat and drink together; and pray; and sing; and go forth to witness and serve. And that ceremony is not finished until Christ comes.

NOTES

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1966), 55.

² William Safire, "Why The Flag-waving?" *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 6 Oct. 1990.

³ *A Declaration of Faith*, The Presbyterian Church (USA), 15.