

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA

Proper 8, Year A, July 2, 2017

The Rev. Bill Queen

“Biblical Patriotism”

Deuteronomy 10:19; 2nd Kings 5:1-14; Galatians 6:1-16; Mark 12:31;
Matthew 22:39

with the day after tomorrow being the 4th of July, I want to take the liberty (so to speak) to consider the topic of patriotism; we’re recognizing Independence Day this morning with a couple of patriotic hymns and with a special prayer that gives thanks for the blessings of our country while challenging us to live up to its highest, yet still unmet, ideals

if we have digested over years of hearing what the Bible has to say about nationalities, different nationalities’ relations to one another, and nations’ relations to God, we might rightly wonder if our patriotism—or that of any other nation—isn’t challenged by a Biblical view that sees the world beyond any single nation’s boundaries; loving our country and wanting and praying for what’s best for it is essential; but it is also essential that we pray for, and care about, the whole world

sometimes we see patriotism take a form that would denigrate every other nation or people but our own; so it is important for us to ponder just what a true Biblical and Christian patriotism would look like; here are some of the key Bible passages that point out a direction for us

2nd Kings ch. 5 relates the story of the Israelite prophet Elisha curing the leprosy of an enemy commander—one who is actively in the process of conducting wartime raids against Israel; why would he cure an enemy?; well, after being cured Naaman, the enemy commander, declares, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel;” Elisha performed this healing of an enemy to witness to the power of God, and to demonstrate the fact that God can do good to any person or nation, even those who don’t yet know of God’s ways; God is always working to bring about that wider knowledge of him

in Galatians ch. 6 Paul instructs believers, “whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all;” again, just like Elisha, any good work we do

for others outside of our faith witnesses to an expansive, welcoming, and living faith, and that is the very best way to attract people to our faith

Jesus summarizes the law, in Mark ch. 12 and in Matthew ch. 22, by saying that loving God and loving our neighbor fulfills all of the commandments; recall that when a lawyer ask Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, underlining the fact that even our enemies—as the Samaritans were to the Jews—are our neighbors; what Jesus is reaffirming here is a Biblical ethic and a Biblical worldview; he is restating an understanding of faith central both to Judaism and to Christianity, namely that, like God, the ministries of our faith know no boundaries of nation or ethnicity

Jesus didn't originate this; he was familiar with Deuteronomy ch. 10, a key passage reflecting a view that appears again and again throughout the Hebrew scriptures; in it God commands us to “love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (and perhaps ‘aliens’ or ‘foreigners’ are better terms to use than ‘strangers’ in our modern way of speaking); our faith heritage is that we are all outsiders, aliens, foreigners; from this, as from Jesus, we are to take the lesson that it is our responsibility to treat modern day aliens and foreigners the way the Israelites should have been treated, but weren't, back in Egypt; it is up to us in our time to look beyond ethnicity or nationality in how we treat people

this Biblical viewpoint only conflicts with a kind of patriotism that would view Americans as better and more worthy than other nations and their peoples; this Biblical viewpoint only conflicts with a kind of patriotism that would seek America's interests at the expense of other peoples'; Moses, Elisha, Jesus, and Paul are all saying that God loves all peoples and provides for them, and therefore we are to do likewise; what we have here is an invitation, a challenge, a commandment even, to make sure that our patriotism is an inclusive one rather than exclusive one; that by giving full consideration to these concerns expressed in the Bible that we might arrive at a concept of an expanded and truly Biblical patriotism

here's another way I like to think of it; the word ‘patriotism’ comes from both Latin and Greek where it refers to the love of the ‘fatherland’, the land of our ‘fathers’; but how many generations back do I have to account for to rightfully lay claim to this being my fatherland?; my fathers and mothers have been

here for a handful of generations; but further back my ancestors came from England & Scotland and, let's be honest, anyone except the Native Americans, the indigenous peoples who had lived here for millennia is an immigrant; and we now have new waves of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who live among us or who want to live here; are we all that different from them?; most of us are immigrants who just happen to have been here a bit longer than some others; so at what point does America become their fatherland, and at what point do we accept them as deserving of the political, economic, and social benefits of this country?

what if we were to consider patriotism instead as the full recognition and love of our 'Father's land' (capital F, as in "our Father who art in heaven")?; this might help us shift our understanding to seeing 'our' country and every other country too, namely the entire earth, as our Father God's one world; and from that we would see that all of God's blessings should be available to all of God's children

this may be a difficult mental shift for us, but it's the view that the Bible takes—it's the view that God takes; now I recognize that such a view may not sound practical, and I recognize that it may not sound politically popular, but when does the Bible ever enjoin us to be practical or politically popular?; this idea of a Biblical patriotism invites us to love our country and to love the rest of the world too; this idea of a Biblical patriotism invites us to make the effort to bring our nation and the entire world ever closer to God's vision of justice and love and peace for all of God's children; this idea of a Biblical patriotism invites us to recognize that we live in a nation "under God" and in a world that is also "under God"