

“The Perils and Possibilities of Patriotism”
June 30, 2024

Amos 9:5-8

Romans 13:1-7

As Independence Day nears, where are we at as a nation?

The state of Louisiana has mandated that the Ten Commandments be posted in every school classroom in the state. I don't know if this will be in Hebrew or in an English translation.

Lest we feel a little Northern smugness about this, we should remember that less than a quarter century ago, a stone Ten Commandment monument could be found a little south from here on Clinton Street in front of the Johnson County courthouse.

In Oklahoma, the state Supreme Court ruled a few years ago that a version of the Ten Commandments literally inscribed in stone violated the state constitution and had to be removed from the grounds of the capitol. Now the State Superintendent has ordered that not just the Ten Commandments, but the entire Bible needs to be taught in every public school. Again, I don't know if this is in Hebrew and Greek or English; I don't know if this will include the Apocrypha that Catholics consider holy writ but Protestants do not. I'm pretty sure that Marilynne's *On Genesis* won't be the textbook, however, even though it includes the King James Version text of that first book of the Bible.

In Iowa, our own Supreme Court decided last week that a ban on abortions after six weeks *was* constitutional, establishing one religious perspective about when life “begins” over all others. We, too, claim that our affirmation of a woman's right to choose an abortion or not to choose an abortion is rooted in our Christian faith that understands who God is and who we are as human beings.

And while there was nothing especially “religious” about it, there was the debate on Thursday evening that left many with a sense of despair and a fear of what this fall might bring.

Where are we at as a nation?

We're caught up in the ongoing dance of religion and politics. While known in other lands as well, we in the United States have our own particular dance. It is more popular at some times than at others. And we are in one of those eras when the dance of religion and politics is especially powerful.

The dance will continue because we are religious people and we are political people. When we deal with the holy, the Bible and our own experience tells us that we are engaged in a very dangerous enterprise. We all run the risk of baptizing and anointing our limited and flawed political perspectives. We all run the risk of enshrining in law our limited and flawed religious sensibilities.

Where are we at as a nation?

As Independence Day nears, I've been thinking once more about patriotism, what might loosely be called “love of country,” and both the difficulties and the opportunities that come with it.

As people of liberal faith, we affirm that a nation cannot follow God. A nation cannot be led by God. We are troubled by any who would impose their versions of God's will on all people.

A nation cannot be led by God, but individuals can be responsible before God as they live their public lives.

This perspective, however, is not limited to people of liberal faith. Some time ago, the conservative magazine *Christianity Today* summarized the differences between the Christian faith and an uncritical nationalism: "The Declaration of Independence is not an infallible guide to Christian faith and practice.... The American flag is not the Cross. The Pledge of Allegiance is not the Creed. 'God Bless America' is not the Doxology. Sometimes one needs to state the obvious" the editors concluded—"especially at times when it's less and less obvious."¹

These are such times.

In spite of the words of the Pledge of Allegiance, we are not a nation "under God," and we have never been one—except to the extent that all nations are under the God who is Sovereign over all creation.

We turn to scripture only to find confirmation that we have indeed entered some very dangerous territory.

Paul writes to the ancient Christians in Rome, telling them: "Every person must submit to the authorities in power." In living memory, Paul's words to the Romans exhorting every person to be subject to the governing authorities was interpreted by some German Protestants as requiring allegiance to Hitler.

But if we listen closely, Paul's call for obedience to governments also relativizes those governments. No government, no nation can claim for itself the devotion that "a creature can only give to its Creator."² We make an idol of our nation if we claim that it is fulfilling some divine mandate or that it is beyond criticism.

This is a long-standing problem in our country. It's been observed that even Alexis de Tocqueville back in the 1830's complained that Americans stiffen at all foreign criticisms. He accused us of an "irritable patriotism," as though we were not secure enough in our new nationhood to admit that some features of our culture deserved criticism.³

Some do find it easier to cry out with the Psalmist: "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord!" In our nation, this thirty-third psalm is often used in a self-congratulatory manner. Hearing some people you'd think that the ancient Hebrew poet was thinking about the United States of America when those words were written.

Scripture is clear, I think, that it is *God* who chooses a nation and a people, not the other way around. When we listen closely to scripture, we hear, not of national greatness, but of the forgiving grace of God. This grace is the "real power behind illusions of power."⁴ If we understand ourselves as living "under God" then let us do what God requires of us. Let us do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly.

There are many problems with patriotism.

And yet, with its problems there is possibility in patriotism as well.

Patriotism can be a great good. The love of country leads people to make great and valuable sacrifices not only as soldiers but also as civilians. At the same time, in pointing out what he called the “paradox of patriotism,” Reinhold Niebuhr observed that patriotism transforms individual unselfishness into national selfishness. He warned that unqualified loyalty to the nation “is the very basis of the nation’s power and the freedom to use that power without moral restraint.”

So, William Sloane Coffin said: “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.”⁵

Loving critics recognize that the very efforts we have made to secure our nation’s future—invading nations to fight terrorists, freeing the financial markets from regulation—have made us even more insecure and vulnerable.

Can we find a patriotism that will help us with the despair we sometimes feel when we face our nation?

Actually, such despair might be the beginning of hope.

We begin to see the possibility in patriotism when it is stripped of illusions. American exceptionalism must give way to a recognition that we are one in a world of nations, aware of the power that we hold and its potential for abuse as well as its many benefits.

God speaks to Israel through the prophet Amos, “Are not you Israelites like the Ethiopians to me?” Even God’s “chosen people” are not beyond the judgment of God. And the other nations are also under God’s care, the objects of God’s love and mercy that extends to all people.

A critical patriotism still needs to state the obvious.

A critical patriotism celebrates the birth of our nation while remembering what has been called our “national birth defect”—the continuation of slavery even as our leaders were able to declare that “all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with...liberty.” And we recall that the framers of the Declaration of Independence ignored Abigail Adams’ plea to John that they “remember the women.”

Frederick Douglass searingly asked in his well-known words of July 5, 1852: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”

And yet, even on that day, Douglass was able to conclude: “...notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery...I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from ‘the Declaration of Independence,’ the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age.”

The “great principles” that Douglass and others have found in the Declaration of Independence provide something as important as the rule of law. Even with its fundamental sin of omission, the Declaration provides the vision for us as a nation. It gives us an identity as an American people

to guide us in the way we might go if we so choose. It is a map, if imperfect and unfinished, that tells us where we might look for America.

Rather than a land of *liberty*, perhaps we find instead a land of the *promise* of liberty. And once such a promise is made, people of good will struggle to make sure that the promise is kept.

So, Martin Luther King, Jr., on that hot August day over sixty years ago, spoke of his hope that one day the places in this America “sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.” Such a hope, such a faith would empower people, King said, “to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

Enough people heard the promise of the equality of all people that the words of the Declaration of Independence have continued to prod and challenge, continued to inspire and encourage us in our evolving struggle for freedom and equality.

This, then is the source of our patriotism—and my hope for what promise to be troubling days ahead—days that will require clear thought and perhaps sacrifice of sorts.

We can celebrate the slow but certain spread of freedom in our nation and the people and the sacrifices that have made this possible.

May God raise up within us and among us a new patriotism that sees and seeks this nation’s good.

¹ Donald Shriver, *America*, July 2, 2007.

² Paul Achtemeier, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary, pg. 205

³ Donald Shriver, *America*, July 2, 2007.

⁴ “Psalm 33,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*

⁵ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, quoted by Donald Shriver, *America*, July 2, 2007