

Patriots

“Let justice roll.”

Amos 5:21-24

*Heart Strings: Lessons for relationships from the Ancient Heroes
(Postscript)*

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Church and State

A conversation broke out during one of our famous “solve-all-the-problems-of-the-church-and-the-world” sessions in the school cafeteria. One of my friends posed the question of whether, when we became pastors, we would allow the American flag to be placed in the sanctuary. The question came as a surprise to me. The flag had always appeared in the sanctuary of my church. In Boy Scouts I learned why it was always placed to the right of the speaker and on several occasions I had proudly carried it into the sanctuary on Scout Sunday and at Scout functions that took place there. Why would I *not* want to post the flag in the sanctuary?

“Because it represents the Kingdom of America,” I was told; “and in the sanctuary, we pledge allegiance to the Kingdom of God.”

Not that I was convinced; but later I discovered that this was not just an academic question. I heard that more than one of my colleagues had weathered firestorms in their churches because they insisted on actually removing the flag.

What do you think?

I’ve never thought this was a sword I wanted to fall on, that there might be more important things to get in trouble over. But symbols are so very important. And talk about the flag always seems to boil up some very strong feelings.

So, if that’s the case, what is the relationship between being a faithful Christian and being an American Patriot? Some people say that if you don’t love our country, you can’t really be a Christian. Other people say you just have to choose between the two: you can be one or you can be the other; but you can’t be both. What do you believe?

A Matter of Justice

The prophet Amos might sound like one of those “keep the flag out of the sanctuary” pastors. He declares himself to be the mouthpiece of God when he says, “I hate, I despise your festivals...Take away from me the noise of your songs...”

But I don't think that God hates the Fourth of July. There's something about picnics and fireworks that might even be for God a delight. And I don't think that God wanted the Israelites to keep from having their festivals and singing their songs. I think God loved the songs and the sound of the harp.

The prophet's problem is not with the festival; but it's having a festival without meaning it. It's celebrating liberty and justice for all without practicing it.

That's what happened to Israel. They had become so used to calling themselves God's people that they thought they could be God's Kingdom without God. They had become so comfortable thinking that they had it made because they were children of Abraham that they stopped acting like faithful people. They worshiped other gods. They cheated the vulnerable. They ignored the plight of the needy, blaming the poor for their poverty.

So, as special as any nation can be, it is not the Kingdom of God all-by itself. It can only tap into God's kingdom by its people living in relationship with God and by its people practicing God's way.

That's what Jesus meant when he said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe this good news.” The kingdom is here, alright: as long as you do what Jesus and the prophets harped on: love each other; love your enemies; forgive those who hurt you; practice peacemaking; let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...be one nation under God with liberty and justice for all.

Practice what you preach, in other words. When you hear that Detroit schools are graduating less than 25% of its students,¹ you have reason for outrage, and even more you have a call to act. When the jobless rate in Michigan reaches over 14%,² those of us who still have an income have reason to be concerned. Even more, we have a reason to stand with those who have lost jobs so they are not alone and so that they are equipped with help and direction. When the earth is still producing enough food for everyone to be nourished and yet 1.2 billion people, $\frac{1}{6}$ th of humanity go hungry,³ there is good reason for us to become alert and mobilized to bring them justice.

Caring for its own people and people of the world is what great nations do. Bringing people together to make peace is what great nations do.

These are things that God expects. You may even call such endeavors *Patriotic*.

The Cross and the Flag

So I say, “Leave the flag in the sanctuary.” Let it be there to remind me where I live and where my field of mission lies. Let it come into the sanctuary in order for us to say that we love our home and that our home is in need of God.

Let it stand below the Cross of Jesus because, after all, America at its best will be America made up of people like you and me working for every man’s and every woman’s justice and liberty. America at its best will be the lot of us reaching for peace and well being among all. America at its best will be America behaving very much like the Kingdom of God.

Fireworks. Wow.

REFERENCES

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- [3] The Wall Street Journal, June 19, 2009. online.wsj.com/article/SB124541317270731181.html