



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Romans 13: 1-7

A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Faith and Patriotism

Romans 13: 1-7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

Revelation 13:1-11

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ²And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'

⁵ The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.* It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.*

⁹ Let anyone who has an ear listen:

¹⁰ If you are to be taken captive,
into captivity you go;
if you kill with the sword,
with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

My original career plans were to be a missionary and so I spent the summer of 1975, (11 weeks), in the city of Ping Tung, Taiwan, working with university students, teaching New Testament and English conversation. On the way home, my travel plans were suddenly changed without my consultation and I ended up having to spend an extra week in Tokyo. I had less than 200 dollars to my name, no credit cards, and had to figure out how to eat and sleep in the most expensive city in the world. By the end of that week, I could not wait to get home. The flight seemed to last forever. Just as we arrived at New York's LaGuardia airport, the pilot got on the P.A. system and informed us that there was not a landing strip available and we would have to circle the airport until one was free. We circled for another hour waiting to land. One of the circles took us around the Statue of Liberty. I will never forget gazing at "Lady Liberty" from the window of the plane and feeling choked up, knowing that I was returning home. This was my country, and I was glad to be coming home to it. That powerful, and visceral experience of emotion is an essential component of patriotism.

Most of us are familiar with the words of the poem by Sir Walter Scott:

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!

That love that we feel for our nation is a good and positive thing. The apostle Paul acknowledged the duties of the Christian as a citizen. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." He exhorted Christians to pay their taxes and to recognize the authority of civil powers. He himself was a Roman citizen. Christian faith recognizes the importance of the civil authorities and government and certainly does not condemn patriotism. But things are never quite so simple.

The primary confession of the Christian is that Jesus is Lord and we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. In other words: Christ is the ultimate authority in our lives. The nation and all the allegiances we owe to our country are secondary to our commitment to Christ. The martyrdom of the early Christians was in part due to their unwillingness to affirm that Rome (and the emperor in particular) had ultimate authority in their lives.

The governments of the world can become despotic. Healthy patriotism can degenerate into chauvinism and mindless nationalism. I have been watching a series on WWII and the rise of Nazism in Germany. While watching the grand spectacles and parades that took place in Berlin, I had no reason to doubt that the people in the crowds lifting their hands in salute to a flag and Fuhrer (both we now regard as evil), believed that they were acting from the best of patriotic motivations. "Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth." (from PCUSA *Book of Confessions*, p 246) In our Book of Confessions is a small section called "The Barmen Declaration". It was written in 1934 by German Theologians who put their lives at risk by stating that Christian faith was not consistent with Germanic exceptionalism.

That is what the book of Revelation is all about. It is a cryptic message to people living under the persecution of a despotic government. The beast rising out of the sea was originally identified as Rome, but it can potentially be any nation. Patriotism run amuck is plain and simple idolatry: "The people worshipped the beast." It is places allegiance to nation over discipleship to Christ and often identifies and confuses the two with each other. That is the warning of Revelation: "Let everyone with ears, hear.... This is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."

The two biblical texts (Romans 13 & Revelation 13) describe the tension with which Christians live out their lives. We are often pulled by different powers, authorities, and allegiances. The two primary claims on our lives are Christ and the nation. As I mentioned, the New Testament has no question which is first: Christ. It is also clear that patriotism itself has the tendency to become idolatrous.

On this day when we remember those who placed so a great a sacrifice upon the altar of our freedoms, I would like to examine the relationship between faith in Christ and patriotism. First the modern challenge, and second four constructive suggestions about how we might live out our faith as patriotic citizens.

I

Developing a constructive patriotism within the context of Christian faith has its challenges:

1. We live in an age where everything has become politicized including ethical issues and religious conviction. Assertions of all types are measured against ideological standards. The result is that we seldom hear what patriotism is, but often hear what it is not. If something does not square with our ideological convictions we assert: "That's not patriotic!" Consequently we seldom hear anything that resembles a constructive and positive patriotism.
2. We don't speak about matters of faith and politics in polite company, because when we do, it seldom remains polite. Consequently, we are not very sophisticated in our political and economic thinking, not to mention our religious convictions. Study after study has borne out this disturbing reality.* The average person knows little about history, economics, or the machinations of governing our nation. The result is we are persuaded by sound bytes, jingoistic rhetoric, and propaganda of all types, which we take as truth. Anything contrary to this "truth" is often condemned as "unpatriotic".
3. We are complicated creatures living in an extremely complex world. Yet we want simple solutions. The economist, Tim Harford in his recent book, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*, begins with a description of the vastly complex world where there are seldom simple solutions. Most solutions and ideas end in failure, but that is part of the process of solving problems. Culturally we want quick and simple fixes that get it right the first time. Adaptation to the new realities of our lives requires cooperation and civility. Both are rare these days.

There are large challenges to a contemporary constructive patriotism.

II

Christian Faith is not inconsistent with patriotism, but it is called to transform our understanding of what it means to be a patriot.

1. Christian patriotism is committed to the "common good". We seldom hear that expression used... more often we hear about individual privilege. The concept of the "the common good" is a central part of Catholic social thought, being the centerpiece of Pope Leo's encyclical in 1891. But it is also at the heart of the biblical message. The Law of Moses is a foundation for the Hebrew nation's common good. Christ's Sermon on the Mount is not an individualistic ethic, but rather one that affirms the common good. Christian patriotism is called to seek and affirm the common good of the nation.

2. Christian Patriotism is passionate for the truth. Christ said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." (John 8:32) In 1908, Mary Baker Eddy, the found of Christian Science, started the newspaper, *The Christian Science Monitor*. It was her response to the journalism of her day and its propensity for covering scandal because it sold newspapers. The *Monitor*, until it recently ceased publication, was known for avoiding sensationalism, while producing a "distinctive style of non-hysterical journalism" I am not a proponent of Christian Science as a faith, but do believe that its founder had it right on this issue. We live in an age where journalism seems more concerned with ideological "branding" than accurate information.

We also need to be informed, not merely from the media, but from the best and the brightest. Societies cannot make decisions about evolution, global warming, off-shore drilling, war and peace, economic stimulus and the like, if it is uninformed about the issues that surround these complex problems. Christian patriots read, study, think, and try to understand. We are passionate for the truth.

3. Christians are called to bring civility to national discourse. Ironically, when church people get involved with any type of national issue, we usually raise the heat and sacrifice civility in the process.
4. Finally, Christian patriots serve. We live in a free land and we enjoy the benefits of the sacrifices that previous generations made for us. It is privilege to live here, and part of that privilege should be to serve. Military service is an honorable way to serve this nation and protect its freedoms. We honor those women and men for their service defending the freedoms we hold so dearly.

There are other ways to serve also. From teaching in our public schools to working as a civil servant. From serving on a school board, to running for village council. From accepting an appointment to office, to serving in congress or other elective office. These are honorable callings and we need to encourage our best and brightest to pursue them. Cynicism in regards to any of these pursuits only serves to rend the fabric of national unity, purpose and common good.

Flying into LaGuardia airport 36 years ago I felt that lump in my throat that reminded me this is my country and I am proud and privileged to live here. I am proud that my own child has chosen to serve in our federal government. But I am also a disciple of Christ, and that calling is first in my life. It transforms and informs all of my allegiances, including my nation.

You will notice the title of this message: "Faith and Patriotism" The order is not accidental: Faith comes first. Struggle with this and believe the Good News. Amen.

*I would encourage readers to seek out a fascinating paper by Anthony Fowler and Michele Margolis entitled "*The political consequences of uninformed voters.*"

http://www.michelemargolis.com/uploads/2/0/2/0/20207607/fowlermargolis_electoral_studies.pdf.