

Sermon N. Baltimore Mennonite Church July 3, 2005
“Mennonite Patriotism” Romans 13:1-2; Luke 10:25-37
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We are in the midst of the 4th of July holiday. Coming as it does during wartime, with the Supreme Court decision on displaying the 10 commandments in the news, it is a good time to think about what patriotism means to Christians in general, and Mennonites in particular. For Mennonites it raises identity issues.

Since you probably don't know my history, I was an Air Force officer from 1971-1979, ending when I was a reserve Captain in the JAG corps. No, it is nothing like the TV show JAG. For most of those years I was in the process of changing my convictions, and I finally requested a discharge. It was ten years later that I was ordained as a Mennonite pastor. My understanding of patriotism changed over that time.

Patriotism is an old idea. The dictionary definition of “Patriot” is “a person who loves, supports and defends his or her country or its interests.” The word comes from the Greek Πατριότης, which meant fellow countryman, a member of one's paternal lineage or clan. As we see in the Old Testament, the clan was the basic defense unit. So originally the term Πατριότης referred to someone ready to defend and support the clan, the extended family of which he or she was a part. Much later the word came to mean loyalty to the king, and finally to the nation state when those came into existence. Loyalty to one's extended family is rather different from loyalty to a political construct. Patriots came to be understood as those who supported and defended their nation state against other nation states. This is a recent phenomenon in human history.

The people who heard Jesus teach knew all about clan loyalty. The duty to support and defend the clan is strong in the Old Testament writings. That is why the Good Samaritan story was so shocking for them, and so important for us. It redefines clan loyalty.

The story is simple and we all know it well. A teacher of the law asks Jesus what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus turns the question back on him, asking how he interprets the law. He replies that he understands the law to require loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus congratulates him for being exactly right. Then the legal expert asks the famous question: “who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies with what we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In the parable a man is beset by thieves and left for dead. This was a pretty common occurrence in those days. Two men pass by without helping, a priest and a Levite. Both were members of the religious hierarchy. What was wrong with their patriotism? Rather than helping someone who was probably a member of their clan, they passed him by.

The reasons are pretty clear from what we know about those days. Besides not wanting to be bothered, they did not want to become ritually unclean by touching a dead body or blood. If they helped, they would have to go through a process of purification before they could participate in temple rituals again. It was better to let some sinner take care of the victim. (For the religious elite, anyone not concerned mostly about ritual purity was a sinner.)

This is quite an indictment of the state of clan loyalty in Israel in those days, but Jesus’ listeners would have nodded knowingly, understanding what had happened. Then Jesus

shocks them by telling how a Samaritan helped the man. Samaritans were to the Jews what Cuban communists are to Cubans in Miami– enemies who are part of the same family.

What Jesus was doing was turning the standard understanding of clan upside down. Your loyalty, he was saying, your patriotism, is not just to your family. It is to everyone, including your enemies. This is a radical change from the usual ethics of that society.

At the time the New Testament was written people's allegiance after their clan was to a kingdom, or to the Roman Empire, the ruling authorities in a place. Jesus does not have much to say about the relationship of his followers to the secular ruling authorities. The authorities he cried out against were the Jewish religious authorities.

Nowhere in the New Testament are we told what Jesus thought about the Romans and their empire which subjugated his people. All we know is that he submitted to them, allowing them to kill him. He instructed the disciples not to fight back when he was arrested. Jesus did speak clearly about what his followers could expect from government. In Matthew 10 as he sends out the disciples he says: "Be on your guard against men. They will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the gentiles."

Governments in Jesus' teaching are not a source of good things. There was no social safety net provided by government. They maintained order and protected their land from outsiders, but didn't do most of what we expect our government to do these days. In the New Testament governments are expected to be the enemies of Jesus'

followers. They are expected to take and to harm, not give and protect. Yet Jesus did not preach against them, just acknowledged their fallen nature.

The Apostle Paul is our biblical source of information on how Christians should relate to government. He was a church planter, and as he organized churches he had to give people practical instructions on how to behave. It is fairly obvious that new converts tended to cause trouble for governments since he had occasion to write about such things in his letters. "Romans 13 tells us 1 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. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Paul explains that governments are a blessing, they keep the peace. Paul told Titus (3:1) to "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone."¹

Paul not only encouraged believers to obey governments, but also to pray for them. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 states, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." Paul encourages us to live by the laws of the land and further to pray for our leaders.

That is pretty much what the New Testament has for us on the subject of patriotism. Submission to government is the theme. Since Christians were not eligible to be in the military in the beginning, there is no discussion of how Christians are

to fight for their country, either pro or con. In fact, the Christian church was pacifist for the first three hundred years. Among the martyrs recorded in those early years are soldiers who converted and could no longer serve, being executed for their refusal. It was not until the emperor Constantine decided his troops should be Christian that all that changed. The famous story is that he baptized his troops by marching them through a river with their sword hands held aloft so that those arms could support him, not Jesus.

The original Anabaptists, from whom we modern Mennonites trace our spiritual history, went back to the New Testament for their understanding of how Christians should relate to government. They realized that in the 1300 years after Constantine the church had become the king's servant, blessing whatever the political leader wanted to be blessed. They realized by reading the New Testament that followers of Christ were to love their enemies, and they could not figure out how killing someone demonstrated that love. Mennonites have never been able to figure that one out. The persecution of Anabaptists was because of their refusal to kill the enemies of the state and their desire to separate membership in the church from citizenship in the state. Modern Mennonites have been persecuted for the same thing, most recently in Eritrea where the Meserete Kristos Church is among those banned by the government.

Mennonites have understood the implications of the good Samaritan story. Our clan loyalty, our patriotism, is no longer confined to our immediate family or only those who live within particular political boundaries with us. It is to all humanity, and especially to our enemies.

The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective says it this way:

“As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. He has called us to find our blessing in making peace and seeking justice. We do so in a spirit of gentleness, willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service. The same Spirit that empowered Jesus also empowers us to love enemies, to forgive rather than to seek revenge, to practice right relationships, to rely on the community of faith to settle disputes, and to resist evil without violence.”

The modern understanding of patriotism is that a patriot is willing to kill or be killed in the defense of his or her country. For those patriots who do not personally participate in the killing, they need to support others doing it in their name. This understanding is shown clearly whenever the subject of pacifism comes up in a discussion of patriotism. Pacifists are not usually considered patriots because they refuse to kill for their country, or even to whole-heartedly support others doing it in their name.

Over the last hundred years Mennonites have been challenged on the subject of patriotism by a number of wars, but also by their status as refugees many times and places. In Fresno we have many Mennonites, most of them Mennonite Brethren, whose families fled Russia after the revolution when the breakdown of order left their comfortable world in tatters and their lives in danger. They are very grateful to the United States and Canada for giving them refuge. Among this group patriotism in the usual American sense has been much more prevalent than among Mennonites whose families emigrated from Europe in the 1700s and 1800s. The remembrance of what life is like

without the order a strong government provides leads them to support strong government, no matter where they live.

I was in Moscow, Russia in October 1993 when order broke down in the last communist coup attempt. The army took a long time to decide which side it would support. There were surging crowds, frightened soldiers shooting into them randomly. The short experiment in democracy looked like it might end. Finally the military decided to back the elected government. The rebels holed up in the parliament building were violently routed out by tanks firing into the building, and it was over. I had a good glimpse of what civil war can look like, and it was not a pretty sight.

The fear of that kind of disorder can motivate patriotism, and it is ungenerous for those of us who are prosperous and relatively safe to condemn the choices people make in such extreme situations.

What does Mennonite patriotism look like? Is it the same as the kind you would find at an American Legion meeting?

The Mennonite Encyclopedia has a good article on Patriotism which I commend to you. It says: "At its best patriotism is an affirmation of neighbor and a sense of joy in a particular land, shared memory, and sense of peoplehood. . . . For Christians, whose membership is in the church as a global community, patriotism poses inherent problems because it competes with loyalty to Christ and the church. . . . The Mennonite understanding of the biblical view of nation is best expressed in verses like Psalm 10:16 'The Lord is king for ever and ever, the nations will perish from his land.' The nations are viewed as temporary structures, passing away. Ps 2:1-2 reflects the characteristic opposition of nations to God's sovereignty: "Why do the nations conspire

and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.”

For those of us who have lived with Mennonites in other countries, the idea of our nation being somehow more important than theirs is an odd idea. If all people are equal in the sight of God, how can nations be otherwise? If all people are my neighbors, how can I support political decisions to kill some of them?

What is Mennonite patriotism? It is a celebration of all the good that comes from good government. It is a celebration of shared heritage and memory. It is participation in making the country where we live a better place. It is a commitment to be constructive in our dealings with government and our fellow citizens. It is our commitment to love our neighbors, to do good to those who persecute us, to pray for our leaders, and to honor God, our creator, above any created thing.

There are people who demand a different type of patriotism of us, one which sets human desires above God's desire that all creation experience shalom, the peace of wholeness in relationships. Our constructive response to them in the spirit of Christ's love is what we owe them. May we each, through the power of the Holy Spirit, show them the love which casts out all fear. Amen.

1. Quotation from www.christiananswers.net.