

Being Patriotic Without Losing Your Soul

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Genesis 12:1-6/ Matthew 5:38-48

I'm really glad you're here today. I know this is a holiday week, and many of our folks have fled town for the summer. It feels good, however, to gather in a holy place and contemplate what it means to love our country in a time when we may not agree with all our leaders.

Last year, Vice President Mike Pence walked out of a National Football League game when players knelt during the National Anthem to protest the continued killings of unarmed black men and the all too persuasive attitude that somehow black lives don't matter as much in America.

The president then tweeted that he told Pence to do that as a demonstration of his patriotism and respect for the flag. Those who knelt said they were expressing their first amendment right to free speech and honoring the nation by exercising their right to peaceful protest of injustice.

So, who is more patriotic? Whose values more closely align with the intent of our founding mothers and fathers?

I don't question the vice president's patriotism, nor do I find a reason to doubt that these NFL players are simply trying to make America a more just and equitable place. What I do question, however, is how we have become a country in which these two expressions cannot be equally valid and valued.

The rising incivility, intolerance, and division we may be the greatest threat our nation faces today. Couple that with the ways in which so many Christians have been willing to compromise their values in the name of tax cuts and anti-immigration policies, and one wonders if young people ever will be willing to claim faith or patriotism as their own.

Several years ago, I wrote a book entitled *The Real antiChrist*. Even though George W. Bush's picture is on the cover, the book really is about how the conjunction of fear-based fundamentalism and xenophobic nationalism has created a value system in this country that is anti-Christian, the antithesis of Jesus' teachings.

In the 1998 movie "Saving Private Ryan," Captain John Miller and his squad of Army Rangers are sent to search for Private James Francis Ryan because all three of Private Ryan's brothers have been killed in action. He is to be sent home to spare his parents further grief.

As they search for Ryan, Captain Miller's squad suffers a number of casualties. With each loss, the survivors question the worth of their sacrifice for one man. One soldier says, "This guy Ryan better invent the world's greatest light bulb or something!"

What invention could possibly be worth that kind of sacrifice?

Private Ryan is eventually found, but almost all the rescuers are killed. His deliverance follows a bloody battle on a bridge. When the fighting ends, Private Ryan bends over the mortally wounded Captain Miller who utters two powerful words.

"Earn this," the dying captain orders.

The movie closes with a scene 50 years later, as an elderly James Francis Ryan, surrounded by his wife, children, and grandchildren visits a cross in the cemetery at Normandy. He remembers all the sacrifices that may have saved his life.

He weeps and wonders if he, indeed, has earned it. "Tell me I'm a good man!" he begs his wife. He is, but who can be good enough for such a great sacrifice?

For Christians, this reminds us of the cross that stands at the center of our faith and that a good man, the best man, died for us.

Jesus didn't die to convince God to love us, but he was willing to lay down his life if that's what it took to convince us we are loved by God. Who could ever be good enough to deserve such sacrifice?

We can **never** earn it, but how we live is in response to that love. The Christian life means living **a life resurrected by love**.

The Gospel lesson we read this morning is the assigned one for the Fourth of July:

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if

anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Parent in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your Parent in heaven is perfect.

Jesus offers some tough challenges here, but I wonder if this isn't what it looks like to take our faith seriously and love God and country.

When Jesus challenges us to "be perfect as God is perfect," he is calling us to love relentlessly without borders; to embody the grace of God; and to remember that, like Abraham and Sarah, we have been blessed **not** because we are God's favorites, but because we are to be a blessing to others.

Politicians of every stripe love to end their speeches by saying, "God bless America," but that prayer is sinful, **unless** by it we mean, "God bless America **so that**, in our wealth and prosperity, we might be able to bless those who are struggling, suffering, and hopeless."

Like you, I love my country and honor those who gave their lives for it, but neither of these realities requires that we always agree with the course our nation is taking, particularly when that direction violates the values of Jesus to care for the least, to welcome the refugee, and to protect the children.

Our patriotism is idolatry when we believe that somehow America is prosperous and strong because **we** are God's favorites.

Yes, the U. S. is wealthy, but the painful truth is we are wealthy for one reason: since its inception, American wealth and prosperity have been at the expense of, well, everyone who is not white.

This nation was built on stolen land, genocide, and slavery, the realities from which our prosperity as a nation is derived. We cannot divorce our wealth from these national sins that were a rebellion against God, not a sign of blessing.

Seventeen thousand, two hundred Native Americans died in one year of smallpox. Accounts report that they were infected deliberately when they were given blankets taken from white soldiers who had died of smallpox.

Of course, our reaction to the government taking children from their families reminds us that we once thought nothing of taking children from slaves and selling them to separate plantations.

None of this is to suggest that we ought not love this country, but it is a reminder of how unchallenged patriotism can lead to incomprehensible suffering for others.

We must choose the way of Jesus. When we ask God to bless our church, or our children, or our country, it must be in full awareness that God's blessings are like a mighty endless river that gives life when it flows but is stagnant and toxic when we try to keep it all for ourselves. We must choose to bless because we have been blessed.

The irony of the movie "Saving Private Ryan" is that Captain Miller's dying words to Ryan are "earn this." The Army Ranger's motto is, indeed, two words, but they are not those two words.

Their motto is "Sua Sponte!" which translates from the Latin as simply, "I choose this."

Those are the words the real-life Captain Miller would have said: **I choose this.** I choose to give my life for my country and my fellow soldier. I choose this sacrifice because of who I am.

There is **nothing** we can do to earn the love of God or deserve the sacrifice of Jesus, but we **can** choose the way of Christ. We can choose to bless because we have been blessed.

We may not be able to choose how we will die, but, today, in this very place, we can choose how we shall live.