Sunday, July 6, 1986
ON BEING A PATRIOTIC CHRISTIAN
Luke 20:21-26

Patriotic feelings have been running strong this past week as we celebrate the 4th of July and also the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, which has been completely renovated.

Personally, I love such celebrations. I am deeply moved by bands playing and flags flying. As a young person, I marched in many parades in the small town where I grew up because the high school band, of which I was a member, was the only band in town, and we led every parade, not only on the 4th of July but on other occasions as well.

The Statue of Liberty is a powerful symbol. By opening its doors to the hungry and oppressed peoples of the world, the United States increased its population from 50 million, 100 years ago, to 227 million in 1980, and we have been strong enough to bring the New World to the rescue of the Old in the two great challenges of this century to Western civilization.

But as we all know, patriotism is more than a feeling or an emotion. It is more than tears in our eyes when the Star-Spangled Banner is played or sung. It is more than saying the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. And liberty is more than ever being able to do what we want anytime we want. In fact, liberty never stands alone but always must be connected or paired with a companion value: liberty and morality; liberty and law; liberty and justice; liberty and the common good; liberty and civic responsibility.

So this morning, let's look again at this question of liberty and its relation to patriotism and how it is related to our Christian faith.

I want to begin by referring to the passage which was read earlier from the Gospel of Luke.

The opponents of Jesus had asked him a tricky question: "Should we Jews pay taxes to the Romans who occupy and rule us and our country?" In other words, should we, in effect, be supporting an enemy government? They might have added, "Is it the patriotic thing to do?" And it was not only a political question, it was also a religious question. Is it right for religious people who claim God as our ultimate authority to also support an earthly government or king?

It was a particularly touchy question. They hoped to trap Jesus with his answer. Some of his followers had strong nationalistic hopes, and any cooperation with the Romans could be seen as being disloyal to his own people. On the other hand, if Jesus answered, "Do not pay taxes to Rome," he could land in the hands of Rome on the charge of treason.

Furthermore, as we all know, the question of how much tax we should pay and to whom it should be paid, and what should be taxed and at what rate, is most of the time a touchy question. It is that even for us who are not occupied by an enemy power.

Since tax money is basically used to support and run the government and the services it provides, the question of taxation leads to an even more basic question for Christians, namely, "What should be the attitude of Christians toward government and the nation of which we are citizens? What kind of patriotism is appropriate for the Christians?"

The answer which Jesus gave in this story from Luke's Gospel gives us some guidance. Let's look at it more closely and see what its implications are for us today.

Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." He was saying, among other things, that there are some routine, practical matters that have to be taken care of in this life. In order that life may have some order, and so that very basic liberties can be had, in every society there must be some kind of civil and political authority. Some kind of government is necessary.
Of course, some authorities are better than others. Government can be oppressive. In our kind of government, it is a continuing debate as to what is the proper role of government, and that debate will always be necessary. However, the point that Jesus was making by implication is that overall, as far as government is concerned, we are to have a positive attitude toward the order-creating functions of civil government because in and through such functions, the providence of God is at work preserving essential conditions for human life.

Without government, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy, and the warning against anarchy because of the unruliness and greed of human beings is one of the most persistent themes in all Christian thinking about the state or government in general.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Some order, some government, is always necessary. We need referees in our common life together. We need police officers, firefighters, legislatures, courts to settle disputes in an orderly fashion, and much more. We need some way of organizing our life together.

Reinhold Niebuhr liked to say, "Our human capacity for justice makes democracy possible; our human capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

So when Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," it was his way of saying that loyalty to country, support of government through taxes and in other ways, is an ordinary religious responsibility.

In our kind of government, this places a special responsibility on all of us, for in the deepest sense, we are the government. Too often, we talk about the government as "they," or as if the government is the opposition, but in these United States, we are the governors and the governed. Thus our system provides channels for the resolution of our conflicts in peaceable ways, and it also provides ways for changing and challenging the rules which govern us.

In our kind of government, therefore, Christian patriotism means working in and through the channels that are provided. Thus we see many members of this congregation, for example, active in both political parties and active in many other volunteer associations which affect our common life together.

I personally think it is unfortunate that there is a tendency in this country to look down on politics as a rather dubious field of activity. To be active in politics and to be a politician in the best sense of that word is a high calling. To withdraw from politics is to withdraw from an essential area of Christian responsibility. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

But Jesus said more than "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." He also said, "Render to God the things that are God's." And that's the part of his quotation we frequently forget. Our biggest temptation is to render to Caesar the things that are God's.

For example, one of the most tempting idols for people in any age is the worship of one's nation. This was true in Old Testament times, and it's been true in every time and place. To be patriotic does not mean that we make the nation or the political party our God. Christian patriotism is critical patriotism.

For example, it is not true patriotism of any kind, secular or Christian, to say, like the bumper sticker we used to see so often, "America, love it or leave it." The sticker usually implied that any criticism of our country was disloyal. If you love your children, does that mean you are never critical of what they are doing? Mature love is not blind. Mature love seeks to improve that which it loves.

The point is the state or nation can too easily become absolute, and the absolute state or nation with its claim to be the source of truth, the only determiner of the purposes of society, and the judge of culture, is an enemy of Christ in any age. When a nation becomes absolute, it must either deny God's existence or seek to make God over into its own image. It must then seek either to destroy the church or domesticate it for its own purposes.

Furthermore, any time a political movement or nation is convinced that it has the final solution for humanity's problems and that, if given power, it can put that solution into effect, it has a rationalization for any ruthless and tyrannical shortcuts in order to gain power and maintain power. This very optimism about its social scheme goes with a blindness to its own temptation as a movement to misuse power and a blindness to the realities of its own corruption. This is the tragedy of communism and of any totalitarian movement.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber-barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber-baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep; his cupidity at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

"Render to God the things that are God's." Perhaps the greatest danger of an immature Christian patriotism in this country is that in practice, it finds itself engaged in the ritual of a kind of civil religion which may begin as a common denominator of several religions but becomes in practice a substitute faith. This kind of civil religion is sometimes nationalistic and sometimes chauvinistic and most of the time devoid of the worship of the one God who transcends all national and racial boundaries.

A related danger which is part of an immature patriotism, and an immature Christian faith is when any of our leaders or political parties invoke the name of God as an attempt to use God for our own purposes. God's name is taken in vain frequently in this way.

As Christians, we must insist that the nation or state is neutral among the various religions which are present in our midst, but we need to remind ourselves, at the same time, that our religious faith is relevant as we go about our daily lives.

Abraham Lincoln knew how to do this. He often expressed elements of biblical religion, though he did not use the Christian symbols which could be divisive in our pluralistic society. Lincoln humbled himself before the sovereignty of God as the transcendent God of history, as the God of righteousness and mercy. How different Lincoln's religion was from the worship of an Almighty who is on the side of one nation or cause. His recognition that good and devout people on both sides of the Civil War prayed to the same God and that the will of God was not

identical with the purposes of either party or any nation meant for him that humility and mercy accompanied commitment to the right as God gave him to see the right.

“Render to God the things that are God’s!” Only God is ultimately sacred. Only God is to be worshipped. This God is the judge of all nations, including ours. Only God is eternal.

To be Christian and patriotic means that we have a mature love of country, and a mature love can see beyond the country’s self-interest and beyond the country itself. Few people loved their country more than did the prophets Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah in the Old Testament. Yet that did not keep them from being critical of their country at times. Their quarrels with their nation were lover’s quarrels. No one loved his nation Israel more than did Jesus. And his quarrel with his country, with its political and religious leaders, was precisely that they were not living up to the ideal and visions of the prophets.

God grant that we may continue to grow and be mature Christian patriots, mature lovers of country as we render to our country the things that belong to it and render to God the things that are God’s.

America, America, God mend thine every flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law. Amen.