Sunday, May 26, 2002
PATRIOTISM AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH
Mark 12:13-17

One day in an attempt to embarrass Jesus, his opponents 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?” It was not only a political question; it was also a deeply religious question. Is it right for religious people, who claim God as their ultimate authority and ruler, to also support an earthly government?

It was an especially touchy question. Those who asked the question hoped to trap Jesus with his answer. Some of his followers had strong nationalistic hopes. For these followers, if Jesus implied any cooperation with the Romans, it could be seen as disloyal to his own people. On the other hand, if Jesus answered, “Do not pay taxes to the emperor,” he could be charged with treason by the Romans.

Furthermore, as all of you know, the question of how much tax you should pay, to whom it should be paid, and what should be taxed, is complex. Since tax money is used to support and run the government and the services which all levels of government provide, the question of taxation leads to an even more basic question for Christians: what should be the attitude of Christians toward government and the nation of which we are citizens? What kind of patriotism is appropriate for “followers of the way?”

I’ve been wanting to do a sermon on patriotism and the Christian faith ever since September 11 of last year. That tragic event has brought forth a resurgence of patriotism. This Memorial Day weekend is a good time to take another look at these questions. I love the patriotic holidays of Memorial Day and the 4th of July. I am deeply moved by bands playing and flags flying. I especially like the band music composed by John Philip Sousa. As a young person in the small town where I grew up, I played in the High School Band, and that band led the parade on Memorial Day and the 4th of July — or any other parades the town had, because it was the only band in town.

However, patriotism is more than a feeling or emotion. It is more than tears in our eyes when the “Star-Spangled Banner” is played or sung. It is more than saluting the flag with our hand over our heart. Patriotism is the love of your country. And love of your country does not mean that you never criticize it. That old bumper sticker slogan, “Love It or Leave It,” was completely wrong. If you are parents and love your children, that does not mean you never are critical of their behavior. On the contrary, if you truly love them, you will do your best to see that they do what you believe is right.

What then is the relationship between patriotism and your Christian faith? The often-repeated cliché says, “Religion and politics don’t mix.” As with all clichés, this one is both true and false. The fact is, religious people mix politics and religion all the time. If your religious faith is a vital one, it affects every part of your life, including your politics. You can never completely separate patriotism, by which I mean your love of country, from your religious faith, nor should you do so.

The frequently used phrase “separation of church and state” is misleading. The United States Constitution, in the First Amendment, says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an

establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This amendment demonstrates that the intent was not to put religion or the churches at a disadvantage, nor was its intent to declare that we are to live totally secular lives. The intent was that the state or government in any of its expressions should not support one religion over another, and that the government in any of its forms cannot require religious practice or devotion. The government is to be neutral in regard to religious expressions, traditions, and institutions.

The opposite is also true. Religious institutions are not to use the government to pass laws or executive orders to support any of their religious practices. For example, so-called "blue laws" have been declared unconstitutional. Blue laws were those passed by city councils, state legislators, or other governmental entities that forced businesses to be closed on the Sabbath, whether the Sabbath was defined as Saturday or Sunday, because the Fourth Commandment of the Ten says that no work is to be done on the Sabbath.

The issue of prayer in public schools is another example, and most of the time, it is misunderstood. Some years ago, the Board of Regents of New York State, which would be like our Nebraska State Board of Education, passed a rule that a prayer was to be offered in Public Schools at the beginning of each day or sometime during the day. That was challenged in the courts and was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1962, because it was state-sponsored prayer. The Supreme Court did not say, as many have since alleged, that no one could pray in school, or as one of our past presidents mistakenly stated with a rhetorical flourish, that the Supreme Court had banned God from our public schools. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Now let's return to our main theme of patriotism and the Christian faith. Jesus said, "Give to God the things that are God's." He was saying, among other things, that there are some routine, practical matters that have to be taken care of in this life. So that our lives together 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 always necessary.

Of course, some authorities are better than others. In athletic contests, some umpires or referees are better than others. Government can be oppressive. But the point Jesus was making, and which the Bible makes in other places as well, 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, without some kind of civil order and authority, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy. 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 role of the state or government in general. I've often said that trying to live in a society without any kind of government would be like trying to play a Big Twelve football game between Nebraska and Colorado without any game officials on the field to keep order. Even if we could assume that all the players on the field were dedicated members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the game would be chaos.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." Some order, some government is always necessary. We need referees in our common life together. We need police officers, firefighters, legislators, and courts to settle disputes in an orderly fashion. We need some way of organizing our life together. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Our human capacity for justice makes democracy possible. Our human capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

So, when Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,” it was his way of saying that loyalty to country and support of government through taxes and in other ways is a religious responsibility. However, in our democratic system, that responsibility falls on all of us, for in the deepest sense, we are the government. We are the emperor. Too often, we talk about the government as “they,” or as if the government is the opposition. But in these United States, with our representative system of government, we are the governors and the governed. Our system of government provides ways for the resolution of conflicts in peaceable ways, and it also provides channels for challenging and changing the laws that govern us.

In our kind of government, therefore, Christian patriotism is very important because it means working in and through the channels that are provided. It means studying the issues, learning all you can about the candidates who run for office, and then voting with the use of your best-informed judgment. I am proud to say that many members of this congregation are community leaders and are active in both political parties and in many other volunteer associations that improve our common life together.

In connecting your Christian faith with patriotism, the second part of the statement of Jesus is also important to remember: “Give to God the things that are God’s.” There’s always the temptation to give to the emperor or the government the things that are God’s.

One of the most persistent temptations in any age is the worship of the nation. To be patriotic does not mean that you make the nation or the political party your god. Christian patriotism is always to be critical patriotism. The state or nation can too easily become absolute. This is especially true when the government and one religion become one — a theocracy. Then it claims to be the source of all truth, the only determiner of the purpose of society, and the judge of culture. The Islamic government of Afghanistan, until its defeat, is a recent example.

When a nation becomes absolute, it must either deny God’s existence, as did Communism, or remake God in its own image, as in Afghanistan.

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 rationale for any ruthless and tyrannical shortcuts in order to gain and maintain absolute power.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Of all the 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.”

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” As Christian patriots, we must insist that the government is neutral among the various religious faiths present in our midst. At the same time, we need to remind ourselves that our Christian faith gives us guidance as good citizens. Abraham Lincoln knew how to do this. He often expressed elements of religious faith, but he did not use specific religious symbols which could be divisive in our pluralistic society. 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 nation meant for him that humility and mercy accompanied commitment to the right as God gave him to see the right.

Christians need to be patriotic because it takes good moral people to make a strong nation. When our nation's founders put together this form of representative government, they knew it would only work if the nation were basically moral at its core. There were some serious blind spots at that time; some of them owned slaves, and none of them thought that women were smart enough to vote. But they knew that nations and smaller governmental units depend, by and large, for their existence upon voluntary compliance with the unenforceable. By this, I mean that most people have to do what's right most of the time, or we fall into chaos.

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 in the Hebrew Bible. Yet that did not keep them from being critical of their country at times. Their quarrels with their nation were meant to bring about its repentance and return to the ways of justice and mercy.

They also remembered God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that he would make of their descendants a great nation and that nation was to be a blessing for all people everywhere. When we say or sing "God bless America," we need to remember this blessing we ask for is not for us alone but that we might be a blessing for all people. That's Christian patriotism at its best. Amen.