

# *My Country 'Tis of Thee*

*Matthew 22:34-40*

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In many churches a perceptible tension emerges on those Sundays preceding or following national holidays such as Memorial Day or the Fourth of July. The tension surrounds the issue of patriotism. Is it appropriate for Christians to give thanks to God in worship for the history and values of their country and the sacrifices that have been made for them by their fellow citizens past and present? The tension that surrounds this issue often seems to be between the pulpit and the pew, between Christian faith as it is proclaimed by the preacher and Christian faith as it is understood in the pew.

The Sunday following that horrible day we now refer to as “9/11” was a difficult one for many ministers. In the midst of their shock, anger, and grief, many church members requested—some even demanded—that the congregation sing patriotic songs in the Sunday worship service and that the minister preach an appropriately patriotic sermon. Some ministers agreed to do so; others did not. And many of those who refused were surprised by the anger and outrage that engulfed them in the days that followed. In a few cases the anger and the estrangement were so great that ministers eventually were forced to leave, to move to new churches.

As in most divorces, there are usually two sides to the story. Many of the ministers involved asked in pain and bewilderment, “After all these years don’t people understand the difference between Christian faith and the idolatry of American nationalism? Surely, after everything we have been through in the twentieth century, people should know by now there is no greater sin than the blind confusion of the nation with God. Jesus’ call to discipleship is not a call to celebrate the American way of life.”

The story from the pew was decidedly different. No less painful and bewildered, but just different. It went something like this. “Over the last thirty or forty years it seems that the leaders of my denomination, including my minister, think it is a sin to love your country, a sin to be grateful to God for the sacrifices that many people have made in order that we may enjoy our basic freedoms. Neither my preacher nor my denomination ever says anything positive about the United States. Do they believe that patriotism is a sin?”

Now, if you have been around almost any mainline Protestant seminary for awhile, you probably recognize the problem. Talk about the United States is almost always from a highly critical, negative perspective. In my experience it would be startling to hear colleagues and students talking publicly about how much they love their country. So, I think the question from the pew is a fair one. “Is patriotism a sin? Is it a sin to love your country?”

The answer of course, as I suspect you well know, is “it depends.” Quoting his own Jewish scripture, Jesus reminds us of Judaism’s foundational claim—that we are to love God and God alone with all our being. Or, in Matthew’s language, “with all our heart and soul and mind.” Only God is to be loved, worshiped, and obeyed. To love anyone or anything else in the same way that we are commanded to love God—with all our being—is idolatrous. It is to worship “other gods.” As the first sentence of The

Scots Confession of 1560 puts it, “We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust.”

However, Jesus also recognizes a second kind of loving that is also commanded by God. Good Jew that he was, Jesus knew there was not only a first table, but also a second table to the law of God. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We are not to love either our neighbors or ourselves in the same way we are to love God—that is, with all our being—but we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. Indeed, the relation between the two commandments implies that we do not truly love God if our love of God does not lead us to love our neighbors and ourselves. As I John 4 tells us, “If anyone says, ‘I love God’ and hates his neighbor, he is a liar” (v. 20).

We live before God by means of two commandments. And it is important that we not reduce the one to the other, that we not confuse them, that we not get them mixed-up. That is what happens so often with our “isms” and our passionately held causes. Whether it is patriotism or whether it is our commitment to peace and justice or our commitment to inclusiveness, the cause consumes us. It, rather than God, becomes our passion—that to which we are committed with all our heart and soul and mind.

Saint Augustine helps us think about Jesus’ words. Sin, Augustine taught us, often takes the form of concupiscence, by which Augustine meant simply “disordered love.” It is not a sin to love. Indeed, we are commanded to love. But we love because God first loved us. The issue, however, is whether we love appropriately, whether we love faithfully. Only God is to be loved with all our being. We must not love anyone or anything else, including our country, *more* than we love God. To love anything more than we love God is, said Augustine, inappropriate and “disordered.” But Augustine also said we must also not love anyone or anything *less* than is appropriate. To love too much is inappropriate. To use a quaint term, it is “sinful.” But to love too little or to refuse to love at all is equally inappropriate, no less disordered, and no less sinful.

What Augustine recognized is the deep linkage in Christian faith between love and gratitude. Disordered love in the form of idolatry is indeed a sin, but we are no less disordered and no less sinful when we refuse to love our neighbors, when we refuse to be grateful for those blessings with which God surrounds us, including those neighbors and that place and those traditions we call “home”—“my own, my native land.”

As you know, the sacrament we refer to as The Lord’s Supper is also named Eucharist or “thanksgiving,” because at this table we give thanks to God for God’s forgiving love and transforming grace in Jesus Christ. We are called to participate in this sacrament with thanksgiving and gratitude for what God has given us in the life of his only begotten Son. But that is not all God has given us, and not all for which we should be grateful at this table. There is more to the splendor and the magnificence of God’s grace than we can ever name or number. Jesus Christ not only enables us to love God and to be grateful to God. He also enables us to love, appropriately, and to be grateful for that grace God gives us in all the beauty of this world, including the beauty of our native land, including our fellow citizens and the sacrifices some of them have made in order that we might enjoy democratic freedoms.

Personally I disagree with our government’s decision to wage war in Iraq. It seems to me a tragic, unnecessary mistake. However, when I watch *The Evening News with*

*Jim Lehrer* on Public Broadcasting and night after night at the end of that program see the faces and names of young American soldiers who have been killed in Iraq, part of me grieves this needless loss of life (both American and the many unnamed Iraqis who have also been killed), but part of me also deeply admires and is grateful to God for the love of family and country that their deaths represent.

So is patriotism a sin? Is it a sin to love your country, to sing “My Country ’Tis of Thee”? Much depends on how we understand the “’Tis.” If we understand the “’Tis” to mean that God and country are the same, if we have confused the two, if we love and serve our country in the same way we are commanded to love and serve God, then yes, patriotism is a sin. A great sin. However, if the “’Tis” means that we acknowledge that our country is a gift to us from God, if the “’Tis” is a call to responsible stewardship of that gift, then no, patriotism is not a sin. We dare not love our country, its history and its traditions, too much. But we also dare not love our country too little. We must not be ungrateful for God’s grace, God’s blessings, in all things.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.