

The Nature of Citizenship

John 3:1-17

If you are a fan of football (the NFL kind), you may have heard the news over the past few days that the league has decided to require all players and personnel to stand for the national anthem. This was in response to the growing solidarity among NFL players taking a knee following the protest initiated a few seasons ago by quarterback Colin Kaepernick out of concern for the increasing number of police killings of unarmed black men. It was a quiet, yet provocative, protest over racial injustice in America. However, in 2018, teams and players will be penalized for doing so. If they want to display any public grievance, even if its seemingly innocuous, players must do it off the field.

Mind you, most people interpret taking a knee as an unpatriotic act of defiance, since it's done during the national anthem. However, to put this into context, none of this would have mattered before the NFL inked a long-term deal with the Department of Defense in 2009, for prior to that players weren't even on the sidelines when "The Star-Spangled Banner" was played. The primary reason the national anthem is now played immediately before game time is because it's a part of the paid television advertisement for the military¹, which includes a military color guard, the national anthem, and finished off with fighter jets flying overhead. The emphasis on patriotism in the NFL is simply a part of their marketing deal with the military. If it was solely about respect for the flag, if it is expected of every citizen, then the NFL would police the stands to make certain every fan stood up, they'd shut down every concession stand, they'd monitor the stadiums and all

¹ Reported on ESPN. Also see, Emma Niles, "How the Pentagon Paid for NFL Displays of Patriotism," www.truthdig.com, Sept. 26, 2017. This is a practice that John McCain, among others, has criticized as inappropriate.

advertisers for any disrespecting sign of unpatriotic indifference. They also would handle the flag according to traditional protocol² (something I learned about in Scouts) which technically is where disrespect occurs. Let me put it this way: if Amazon came up with a better deal than the Defense Department, you'd likely see the Amazon Smile painted on the field and drones flying overhead and the national anthem played at the time it used to be, i.e., 15 minutes before kickoff!

It doesn't help, of course, that these are weird times, where our society and culture seem very unsettled and it takes little to provoke or polarize people. Even the American flag has become a test of loyalty and a prop for nationalism, which turns patriotism into a form of idolatry. If history is our guide, usually, that isn't a good sign. As if that isn't enough, we have to be careful about not being manipulated by the media, or the influence of money, or the constant political madness, let alone the various ideologies and popular appeals that claim our allegiance. It would seem we are in a time when our moral sensibilities as citizens and as Christians are being tested in ways we've not faced in quite some time.

This is the claim made by a number of prominent moderate evangelical and mainline Christian leaders around the country this past week, spearheaded by a group that authored a declaration and marched in a candlelight procession to the White House on Thursday evening. They have been meeting for several months composing their statement, "Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis." The opening paragraph states: "We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now

² See www.USFlag.org. The flag shouldn't be carried flat, as in across an entire field of play, nor should it be used as decoration, including on beer cans or hats or helmets. Bunting is to be used for decoration.

at stake.” Several concerns have been raised about disturbing trends in U.S. society and political leadership, as evidenced by these words:

Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition...Therefore, we reject the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life...The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society...

We believe that Christ’s way of leadership is servanthood, not domination...Therefore, we reject any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule...

[W]e reject “America first” as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal...

The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class, and gender divides, as Galatians 3:28 teaches us. But our answer is to be “in Christ,” and to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable, and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

The best response to our political, material, cultural, racial, or national idolatries is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Jesus summarizes the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:38). As to loving our neighbors, we would add “no exceptions.”³

Should you be interested, I’ve made copies of the full statement available in the Narthex.

What these church leaders are wrestling with is the distinction and interplay between citizenship in a nation and its nature in the realm of God—an ancient and existential distinction highlighted in both Hebrew and Christian canons and at length in later writings (e.g., Augustine of Hippo, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, et. al.). At the center of their convictions are the teachings of Jesus as to how we are to treat all people (those of the opposite sex, family, neighbors, strangers, foreigners, immigrants, and enemies) and

³ “Reclaiming Jesus: Church Elders Release Confession of Faith for a Time of Crisis,” www.reclaimingjesus.org, May 12, 2018.

across the spectrum from the most powerful and affluent to the neediest among us—basically what kind of society do we aspire to be? The challenge for people of faith is that we are to direct our ultimate loyalty and allegiance away from our native tribal and national interests to the more universal and eternal values of God. Echoing the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.” That is the character and nature of citizenship in the realm of God and as citizens in a nation.

I appreciate what they’re standing up for, recognizing at the same time this has become a daily struggle for many of us. It’s hard to reconcile the faith we hold at the center of our lives and the love we have for our country, particularly when what many of us now witness is an incredible rash of incivility, selfishness, bullying tactics, and violence rising as it has over the past several years, culminating in what many of us see as an unprecedented crisis over moral leadership in our society, the shameful disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and the rising tide of white nationalism and chronic scapegoating of foreigners—here in a country that has been built by immigrants, one generation after another. What’s been unleashed is far too extensive to be attributed to one administration or one election; it’s become reflective of the darker character of human experience, which is a scary realization. Unless we rise up and push back against it, it will become normative potentially enough to redefine the nature of citizenship, where fairness, equality, let alone compassion and cooperation, across the social divides will seem the exception, rather than the rule. If so, then the nature of citizenship in this great nation will mean something profoundly different than most of us once knew.

As these church leaders point out, the claims of Jesus are quite relevant now, not unlike they have been in other troubling times. The last thing we want is to carry within us remorse for lacking wisdom and boldness when it was called for, much like Martin Niemöller famously expressed anguish among German Lutherans in the aftermath of the Third Reich:

First, they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a communist.
Then, they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Jew.
Then, they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then, they came for the Catholics and I did not speak out—
because I was a Protestant.
Then, they came for me—
and by that time, there was no one left to speak for me.

We are already witnessing similar scapegoating and silence at the highest levels.

Jesus of Nazareth, of course, lived during very turbulent and restless times in Galilee and Judea. We can't remove him from his context and pretend it didn't matter. It did. His stories, miracles, and teachings were intended to transform the way reality was for so many, whether as victim or as oppressor. His people were, in Isaiah's words, living in a land of deep darkness—of spiritual oppression and agonizing despair. That's the condition Nicodemus finds himself when he comes to question Jesus' intent.

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin—the temple governing body consisting of both major religious parties at the time, i.e. religiously conservative Pharisees and the more liberal Sadducees. As with any governing body, power and authority play a major role—who's got it and who doesn't. At some point along the way, Jesus' grassroots popularity

became a problem because it was outside of ruling powerbase. Would he support the Pharisees or did he side with the Sadducees? Was he “Red” or was he “Blue”? Would he play their game, or would he challenge their authority? To protect their mutual interests, the Sanhedrin wanted to know if Jesus was loyal and therefore controllable, or if he would be another to come along to incite rebellion and social unrest. So, they sent Nicodemus to secretly figure him out.

Nicodemus was merely a foil in many ways, representing those anywhere and at any time, who are caught up in the spiritual darkness of a system which manipulates those under its influence and control. Every system makes known its loyalty terms; a few will demand and test it. Does one’s ultimate allegiance reside in a particular economic or political ideology, a cultural heritage or tradition, or to a market or business interest; does it belong solely to a nation or the history of a certain people, to a specific set of beliefs or in an ethnic identity, or anything else that demands loyalty from us?

In a religious setting, it may be in any of those. In an imperial system, loyalty is measured by submission to law and order, support for a ruling class, party, or leaders, honoring the military and esteeming the symbols of the state. Every imperial order uses religion or superstition in some way to support its authority—to manipulate the masses, to underscore that the state is supreme under God. Except the god behind it is one of their own making—the god which serves the tribal or economic interests of the powerful to maintain order and control. Those who oppose its authority—those who resist or rebel—are viewed as enemies of the state and enemies of all that’s sacred, vilified for their disloyalty. Those who buy into this, who are immersed in darkness, “justice” is reinterpreted as “Just Us”—

meaning, of course, security for the state and society more than any aspirations for fairness or equity. Nicodemus coming as he did in darkness represents, in a way, all of this in Jesus' time.

Jesus' point is this: the darkness of the system is reflective of the darkness within people. The heart of humanity must change. The divine vision for human community is undermined by the selfishness and hedonism of people, by its "Me first!" mentality, by its competing loyalties, while the idolatrous demands of the state reflect its darker spirit systemically in actions taken solely for its own preservation and power. To be redeemed from this spiritual destiny of deceit and despair, one must listen to the conscience of society raised up by divine inspiration and rooted in ancient wisdom. This is what Jesus offered Nicodemus: you must be given a new spirit—re-spirited, as it were. You must find your life through a spiritual rebirth, choosing eternal values of heaven over the expedient ones of earth.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus made this point repeatedly in a series of binary choices: will it be God or Caesar? God or Mammon? Will you embrace the poor or lionize the rich? Will you support the meek or serve the interests of the powerful? Will you choose love or hate? Which path is it: Justice, or Just Us?

When we choose wisely and sacrificially for the things of God, we will see the distinctions between our competing loyalties; we will begin to let go of tribal interests which are not as important as they're perceived to be; we will notice the divine image in all people. When we reclaim Jesus, we begin to distinguish between the nature of being a citizen of a nation and being one in the realm of God. It's not that divine interests won't parallel national or societal ones at times—in fact, that's what we would hope for.

But when you are a citizen of one realm, you can discern and recognize when another realm is or is not an ally and a choice must be made and made evidently clear.

That's what I believe these church leaders are attempting to do in our present times in their statement and their actions. Their hope is not unlike that voiced in the last verse of our text for today: "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"—saved through his teachings, saved through his example, saved through his commands to love, saved through his Spirit who inspires the truth and unites us in service to the world, saved through the consciences of those whose values are invested in those of God's realm, and saved through those who bear witness in the community of the beloved, which by inspiration of God's Spirit continues to uphold the better angels of humanity and serve as the conscience to a time in history that is losing its moral center. If we, with them, are successful in doing such, then we will help redeem the very spirit and nature of citizenship in this land.

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