

"What is a REAL Patriot"
Luke 18:18-19
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Sometimes when I'm checking out at the local grocery store, I'll have a little fun with the cashier. As I'm handing her my items, she'll look up, smile, and then casually remark, "Hello. How are you doing today?" That's when I'll stop and with mock seriousness ask, "So you really want to know how I am? You're sincerely interested in how I'm feeling and want to know how my day has gone- is that what you're asking? For if you're serious, then let's pull up a chair and I'll spend the next half-hour or so telling you all about it and then YOU can tell me whether my day has been good or not." By then, the cashier is completely flustered and sputters in reply, "Well, well, I, I didn't mean THAT. I was just, just trying to make conversation." That's when I break into a large smile and assure her that I'm only kidding. I know she's not really interested in how I'm feeling right or how my day has been. She doesn't even care to know my NAME! All she's doing is just being polite and friendly as we complete a commercial transaction together, that's all. Of course we ALL have a habit of asking persons we don't know, "How're you doing?" don't we. It's merely a standard way of greeting others in a cordial, non-threatening manner. However, it DOES show that we don't always SAY WHAT WE MEAN or MEAN WHAT WE SAY when we speak.

I kind of suspect Jesus may have been playing the very same game with the rich young ruler who approached him wanting to know how he could have eternal life. He addresses Jesus with the salutation, "Good teacher" which then opens the door for Jesus to have a little fun with him. "Why do you call me good?" he asks. "No one is good but God alone." Of course, Jesus

wasn't saying here that he WASN'T good but illustrating how by employing a term LIKE "good" as casually and as carelessly as we so often do, that we can end up losing sight of its ACTUAL meaning. Strictly speaking, goodness is a term one can only apply to GOD for when all is said and done, only GOD is capable of being good. TRUE goodness, you see, is a much greater and deeper thing than either that young man or even ourselves often realize for our OWN sense of goodness is always relative, always tinged with our own selfishness and pride, while GOD'S is ALWAYS full of his unconditional, unlimited love. Unlike US, God DOES say what he means and means what he says!

Well ANOTHER word we tend to play fast and loose with these days is the word "PATRIOTISM." Since 9/11 and the onset of two U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been a resurgence of patriotism in this country the likes of which has not been seen since World War II. Our son Michael who is in the Navy has shared how on multiple occasions complete strangers have approached him, shook his hand, and then said, "Thank you for your service," or he'll be eating in a restaurant and someone will unexpectedly come over and offer to pay for his meal. The irony is that for all the talk from our government leaders and the political pundits about the need to be "patriotic," the answer to the question of what exactly CONSTITUTES a "patriot" has never been murkier. Since our nation's founding, patriotism has been invoked to make the case for all SORTS of things: military sacrifice, conscientious objection, unity, dissent, inclusion, exclusion, anti-Communism, anti-Catholicism, tax cuts, a living wage, to name a few.

There have been two main traditions concerning the essential meaning of "patriotism." There is one that implies unquestioned loyalty to one's country REGARDLESS of its policies. You may remember seeing those bumper stickers some years back that preached, "Get your heart in America or get your rear end out," implying that a TRUE patriot can only be someone who

supports the President and the government whether for good or for ill. The OTHER tradition says that a patriot is not someone who is uncritically wedded to our country REGARDLESS, but one who is devoted FOREMOST to our democratic principles and believes in upholding the ideals our country represents. In the 20th century, the UNQUESTIONING form of patriotism has often expressed itself in a lot anti-immigration sentiment, in the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII, in McCarthyism, and in slogan “America, love it or leave it” which was so popular during the Vietnam era. Since the end of the Second World War, the more DEMOCRATIC form of the term has represented not just victory over fascism but in seeing our original principles of life, liberty, and justice for all extended to EVERYONE. It recognizes the dignity and rights of those who’ve had them denied far too long- to women, to Blacks, and to the handicapped; to gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons among others. Thus, as we can see, one person’s definition of “patriotism” just may be another’s person’s definition of what is “UN-AMERICAN” and vice versa.

Of course, there is no GREATER symbol of American patriotism than our own flag. Amid all the parades and fireworks of yesterday’s Fourth of July celebrations, you couldn’t look anywhere without seeing the red, white and blue prominently displayed- a testament to the pride people have in our country and its long fought-for liberties. Flags could be seen hung from peoples’ front porches, featured on tee shirts, and displayed on decals on the back end of cars and pick-up trucks. I even seen the American flag emblazoned across one’s BICEP in a colorful tattoo.

The issue of “flags” continues to incite the emotions of persons on all sides of the political divide. On the one hand, there are those who adamantly feel that the American flag possesses an almost sacred aura and those who deface or burn it should be tossed into prison and

the keys thrown away. On the other, there are those who insist that flag-burning is a permissible form of protest and free speech that should NEVER be prohibited, a position the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with in a decision some years ago. This debate has ONCE AGAIN taken center stage over the issue of the Confederate flag with patriotic Americans sitting on BOTH SIDES of the issue. On the ONE hand, you have those who argue for its continued display as a source of deep Southern pride. It's viewed by them as a tribute to their Confederate ancestors who fought and died during the Civil War. On the OTHER hand, you have those who find its symbolism offensive and insist on seeing it removed from our statehouses and government buildings due to its historic connection to slavery and racism in our country. They say it should be put in a museum where it rightly belongs, but it should NOT be allowed to fly over government property where it continues to divide its citizens one from another. Apparently, the leaders of Mississippi finally agreed as this past week, it became the last state in our country to remove the Confederate emblem from their state flag.

For MY money, a patriot isn't necessarily one who unfurls the flag from his porch every Fourth of July or who can say the Pledge of Allegiance the loudest or who marches in all the VFW parades- actions ANYONE can perform. As far as I'm concerned, a REAL patriot, is someone who embodies the HIGHEST AND BEST VALUES our nation has to offer. Someone who is honest, kind, and generous; someone who works intelligently and industriously in all he or she does; someone who opts for the common good instead of always seeking his or her OWN advantage; someone who wants to improve our society but won't step over other people in order to do it. Almost two centuries ago, the English essayist William Hazlitt put it best, "The love of liberty is the love of others; the love of power is the love of ourselves." A person who adopts THAT for his or her credo truly understands freedom and helps to make this nation most free

INDEED.

This applies to matters of FAITH as well. To quote Lord Acton, "patriotism is in political life what faith is in religion." If Samuel Johnson was right when he famously said, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," then people can just as easily wrap themselves in RELIGION as they can in the FLAG and their vision can be just as narrow. They're right and everyone not in accord with their own views are wrong. I'm sure you've heard some of the comments: "Roman Catholics are all Pope worshippers" and "The Jews are all 'Christ killers'," while many fundamentalists STILL believe that all Afro-Americans are the accursed 'sons of Ham'"- Ham being the son of Noah who exposed his father's nakedness. Some blow up abortion clinics while others burn crosses in people's front yards- all the while justifying it in the name of God.

A couple of years ago, a scene took place at an annual arts and music festival in Columbus, Ohio involving an encounter between a hate-spewing preacher and a seven-year-old first grader; it was captured on camera and quickly became an internet sensation. For several minutes, the minister was shown bending over her- bellowing fire and brimstone directly into her small face, screaming from the top of his lungs how all homosexuals are deviants and going to hell. That little girl, on the other hand, stood face-to-face and toe-to-toe with him, quietly and courageously waving a small rainbow flag—the symbol of the gay pride movement--without backing down from the bully for one moment. Now you tell ME who the greater patriot was in that picture!

In the late 70's, when I was still working in the construction trade, I was to insulate a home for a realtor in California who made no secret of his Christian faith. He picked me up in his car to take me to the job and I saw that it was plastered with bumper stickers proclaiming "I

Found It" and "Honk if you love Jesus." The inside of his auto was filled with Christian pamphlets and tracts designed more to scare hell into people than out of them. No sooner did I get into it when he began to throw verses from the Bible at me, telling me that if I didn't repent of my sins, I was en route to perdition. Needless to say, I kept my mouth shut for I didn't feel his type of evangelism warranted any kind of response.

When we finally got to the job, I was left there with another man who was the electrician. He asked me if the realtor had tried to convert me. Then he said that he had purchased a home from him a few years before and that he had turned out to be one of the biggest crooks he had ever dealt with. He said, "You know, I don't have anything against religion but I have learned that there is one kind of Christian to stay away from and that's the 'born-again type'- they're nothing but hypocrites."

I didn't tell him that I WAS one of those "born-again" types for I felt terribly ashamed that we could so easily wrap ourselves in tracts and bumper stickers, in overt religiosity and yet be so empty of the REAL Spirit of Christ inside. It's just more proof that it's far easier to PLAY church than to BE the church in the world. For my money, a REAL Christian isn't necessarily someone who can recite large passages of the Bible at the drop of a hat, someone who has had perfect Sunday School attendance for the last twenty-five years, or who always tithes ten percent of his or her income. As far as I'm concerned, a REAL Christian is foremost someone who embodies that which is highest and best our faith has to offer, someone who not just wears a cross over his heart but carries it IN his heart as well.

A REAL Christian is genuine and sincere, who does not have to resort to fraud or pretense. Such a person is humble enough to understand her weakness and shares it because she knows she can't go it alone. A REAL Christian is honest, patient, generous and kind. A REAL

Christian is sacrificial and seeks to emulate Christ in all her actions while asking for forgiveness from God and her neighbor when she doesn't. There's an old saying we used to have in college, "Tell me your faith and I might listen, but SHOW me your faith and I will follow!" The power of the gospel is revealed in all its fullness through HUMAN LIVES- and not through all the religious paraphernalia and bric-a-bracs we can buy at Christian bookstores. As easily as anyone can wave a flag, anyone can wear a cross as I recently saw dangling around the neck of a young man arrested for murder. Only a REAL Christian can LIVE the cross!

One of my favorite writers is Nicholas Kristof, a weekly columnist for *The New York Times*. In an article a few years back, he told about a most REMARKABLE MAN- a Catholic missionary named Dr. Tom Catena, 51 from Amsterdam, N.Y. Kristof told how he's not only the sole doctor at the 435-bed Mother of Mercy Hospital nestled in the Nuba Mountains in southern Sudan, Africa- he is the ONLY doctor throughout the entire region for a population of more than half a million people. Almost every day, the Sudanese government was dropping bombs on civilians in the Nuba Mountains. All the major powers, including our OWN country, averted their eyes to the carnage, and so it was left to "Dr. Tom" (as he is universally known ther), to pry out shrapnel from women's flesh and amputate the limbs of children, even as he also delivers babies and removes appendixes. He does all this off the electrical grid, without running water, a telephone or so much as an X-ray machine, while under the constant threat of bombing as the government has dropped eleven bombs on the hospital ALREADY.

He has worked there for eight years, living in the hospital and remaining on call 24/7. He does all this for a paltry \$350 a month with no retirement plan or regular health insurance. When asked what drives him, he will tell you that it is his Christian faith. "I've been given benefits from the day I was born," he says. "A loving family. A great education. So I see it as an

obligation, as a Christian and as a human being, to help.”

The Nubans (who include Muslims and Christians alike) REVERE Dr. Tom. “People in the Nuba Mountains will never forget his name,” said Lt. Col. Aburass Albino Kuku of the rebel military force. “People are praying that he never dies.” A Muslim chief named Hussein Nalukuri Cuppi offered an even MORE UNUSUAL tribute: “He’s Jesus Christ,” he said. He went on to explain that Jesus healed the sick, made the blind to see, and helped the lame to walk—and that is what Dr. Tom does every day.

I believe that REAL Christians make REAL patriots, and if that is the case, then Dr. Tom Catena is an example of the HIGHEST and BEST patriot one can be. Christians are "the salvation of the commonwealth," said Augustine, for they fulfill the highest role of citizenship. They do so, not because they are forced to or out of allegiance of some political leader, but because they love and obey the King, Jesus Christ, who is ABOVE all temporal leaders. Out of that love and obedience, they love their neighbors as they love themselves and they promote justice and equality to make our system fairer for ALL people. They remain the conscience of our culture, a people who seek to do good, not out of compulsion but out of COMPASSION; persons who want what's best for our nation, not because it's best for themselves but because they view it as what's best from CHRIST’S perspective. Yes, ANYONE can wear a cross, ANYONE can carry a Bible, and ANYONE can sit in a church pew, but the one who LIVES the cross is the only TRUE Christian, the only REAL patriot on this Fourth of July weekend. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, these three things we pray: To see thee more clearly; to love thee more dearly; and to follow thee more nearly, day by day. In this way, we hope show others what that true and higher patriotism looks like. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen and amen.