

PATRIOTISM, NATIONALISM & IDOLATRY

Remarks of Rev. Jerald Stinson
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I grew up in a small Utah town in the Eisenhower Cold War era of the 1950's. Everybody loved the American flag. On the Fourth of July the parade had the junior high and high school bands playing patriotic music and the baton twirlers wearing red-white-and-blue. We were proud Americans – this was the land of the free; the home of the brave. We knew our enemies, the Russians, were evil: invading other lands; torturing people; ignoring civil liberties. We were different, or so I was told.

As the years went by, I saw things about this nation that bothered me. As a teenager, I learned of a bomb in a church that killed innocent children whose only crime was the color of their skin. On the Huntley-Brinkley news on our black-and-white TV, I saw George Wallace and Orville Maddox, Southern governors, preventing black children from going to school.

I left for college in 1965, and my first year I joined a sit-in in the President's office; we stayed until he agreed to begin a black studies program. I marched on behalf of feminists and with farmworkers. I picketed with the Congress of Racial Equality and was in dozens and dozens of demonstrations against the War in Vietnam, one of which led to my expulsion from college. The patriotic visions of my childhood had gone sour. And my faith, rooted in justice, challenged what this country had become. By 1967, the naïve Utah Eagle Scout had joined the New Left. The flag in which I had had such pride now symbolized bigotry, chauvinism, and an immoral war.

Throughout the years since then, the tension between love and criticism of my country has continued. How patriotic should people of faith be?

I think we need to distinguish between critical, enlightened patriotism and idolatrous nationalism. Let me lift up three broad distinctions between patriotism and nationalism.

First, patriotism, steeped in critical thinking, honestly examines the past and present and is always a humble enterprise. In contrast, nationalism is rigid, arrogant and self-righteous.

True American patriots love their country and look at American history to affirm and celebrate values and virtues that are good and positive. We affirm moments when we have sought liberty, freedom and equality. But love of country also means we confess that we have often fallen short of our noblest goals. Patriotic pride must include confession.

The essence of patriotism is the dream of what we strive to be. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a model patriot. He knew the dream, and he knew we had often stumbled in pursuing it. Remember his words: "I still have a dream; a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed that all are created equal." King the patriot called people back to

the possibilities of the dream.

On Columbus Day, true American patriots look at what Christopher Columbus and the European settlers did to Native Americans, and we confess that horrible history. The biblical narratives are full of such patriots – Isaiah, Amos, Micah, Jeremiah – who loved their nation enough to criticize it for not living up to Moses’ dream.

Nationalism, on the other hand, fears critical thinking and condemns critics for being unpatriotic. Barbara Lee was the only member of Congress to originally vote against giving unlimited war powers to a President most Americans didn’t vote for. She was critical of a President who wanted to invade another nation in quest of weapons of mass destruction which he knew weren’t there in the first place. As a consequence, in the nationalistic fervor sweeping the United States as we invaded Iraq, Ms. Lee faced so many death threats she had to hire bodyguards.

We denounced the barbarity of sending hijacked planes into a building filled with innocent civilians, but we forget that we dropped atomic bombs onto innocent civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing 140,000 of them. Patriots are honest about history; nationalists can’t deal with that honesty.

Today’s nationalists, including the president, condemn as unpatriotic those who want our troops out of Iraq. They condemn as unpatriotic those who challenge the oppression of Palestinians by an Israeli government propped up by the United States. But true patriots love their country enough to risk being honest about its past and present, calling us back to the dreams upon which this nation was founded.

And nationalism becomes even more frightening when it weds religion and nation. Medieval Christian crusaders felt God was on their side as they slaughtered Muslims and Jews. Hitler believed God was on his side as he cleansed the world of all non-Aryans. And the American religious right would have us believe God wants the tanks in Iraq and the settlers in Israel.

Singing “God bless America” do we mean, may God bless this and every nation, including Iraq, Palestine, North Korea and Iran – I can affirm that. Or are we asking God to bless us alone because we are God’s best people and our causes are God’s causes. The latter is the credo of nationalism.

My second distinction: patriots affirm our nation but only within the broader context of a global community. Nationalists say our nation should ignore our global neighbors, unless it suits our own self-interest.

I would contend genuine patriots desire dialogue with their global neighbors and understand that critical global decisions must be made with the best interests of all of God’s global family in mind.

Nationalists define our worth over and against others. They turn life into fierce competition, a struggle between nations. Patriots called the events of 9/11/01 a terrible crime; nationalists called them acts of war by another nation and then stretched the truth to find a nation to blame.

Throughout history American nationalists have often defined us in opposition to others. Nationalists have little use for anyone else in the world. Unless Americans die in a disaster elsewhere in the world, there will be little American news coverage of it. Contrast the BBC news with American news programs – we are only interested in what happens to us. Watch our Olympic television coverage. If an American isn't going to medal in a sport, that sport is not apt to even be covered. Think of those in the Olympic stands chanting, "USA, USA, USA." Instead of delighting in individual athletic skill, we turn the games into nationalistic competition.

Nationalism says we don't need others. We don't pay our UN dues and disregard the UN whenever a decision doesn't rubber stamp what we want. We invade nations unilaterally. We are the best, greatest, most powerful – or so the nationalists tell us.

We have no use for the World Court; our delegates walk out of global conferences on racism because we don't like what other people are saying about us. We won't sign protocols to save this planet if we fear they will hinder the economic interests of our corporations. Then we wonder why the World Trade Center and Pentagon, symbols of our wealth, military might and arrogance were targets of hate on 9/11.

Now a final distinction: Patriotism wants to stop that which demeans human life, but it knows we dare not become the evils we deplore. But nationalism hunkers down in such arrogant hatred its adherents stoop to the level of those they condemn.

In the 1950's, I would never have believed my nation would begin a preemptive war, invading, occupying and virtually destroying another nation. And then our leaders would almost flippantly talk about the possibility of other invasions.

In the 1950's, I would have thought it impossible that my nation would use torture; that a nominee for Attorney General would support torture.

I think true patriots know that we don't stop killing by more killing; that wiping out villages of innocent people won't convince folks that killing is wrong. You don't go after a bully, by being one yourself.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, said after September 11, 2001: "We've been spoken to in the language of terror and hate; if we reply in the same terms, we say, 'All right, that's how we are going to go on.'" But he said, "We have a choice which language we speak." You see patriots struggle to make the right choice; nationalists mimic the behavior they condemn.

And nationalism often defines its enemies with broad strokes, condemning not an organization like Al Qaeda but all Arabs or all Muslims. The nationalists' response to an act of hate is to create a hate crime of their own.

Peter, an early Christian leader said, "God shows no partiality toward the people of one nation over another." Another translation says, "God has no favorites." Contrary to the tenets of American nationalism, God doesn't like us better and love us more than others.

After the 9/11 attacks, Rabbi Michael Lerner had a suggestion that I think true patriots

would affirm. He said it would be hard for the Bin Ladens of the world to recruit people against us if we would commit ourselves to using our economic resources to end world hunger and redistribute the wealth of the planet, so that everyone has enough. People wouldn't resent us for hoarding wealth, for affluence built upon sweatshops of the Third World. Lerner said those who hate the United States would be marginalized if we championed an ethos of generosity, caring and social justice. But Lerner's wisdom was ignored; the nationalists prevailed and we invaded Iraq.

Let me end with a story about violinist Itzhak Perlman who walks assisted by crutches and braces. One evening at a famous concert hall, Perlman slowly walked on stage. He set aside his crutches, removed the leg braces, took his violin and nodded to the conductor.

A few bars into the piece, a rifle-like sound filled the auditorium – a violin string had snapped. The orchestra stopped; the audience waited. People assumed he would put on the braces, get the crutches, and leave the stage to restring the violin. But after a pause, Perlman set his violin under his chin and signaled the conductor to start anew.

A musician in the audience said, "I know it is impossible to play a violin concerto with only three strings. But that night, Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing in his head. At one point, it sounded as if he were retuning the strings to get sounds they had never made before."

When he finished, people rose and cheered. Raising his bow to quiet the audience, in a quiet, pensive tone he said: "Sometimes an artist must find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

Those of us who truly love the American dream – those of us who would be genuine patriots know that an ugly American empire has in many ways replaced the America of our forebears' dreams. We know most of the world's people see us as a bully, a nation that tortures and invades; a nation revealed at My Lai and Abu Ghraib. We must turn that around. Electing a Democratic congress didn't do much. We must figure out how to make the music of freedom, of global equality and of peace with justice a part of the remnant we have left of the American dream. That – is our challenge; the challenge of true patriotism.