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Barbecue and Doxology, Patriotism and Faith: A July 4 Reflection

(Galatians 5:1 and 13-16 and 22-23 NRSV) For freedom Christ has set us free.... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.... 22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

During World War I, one of the customs that developed during the long years of trench warfare in France, is something that make strike us as simply bizarre. Sundays were holidays. No fighting took place on Sundays. And not only that, but the Germans and the Allies – who for six days each week would often charge the other side's trenches, leading to horrific carnage from machines and mustard gas – would come up out of their trenches, meet in the middle (in what came to be called, aptly, "No Man's Land") and have a picnic together. They would exchange goodies. They would talk and laugh and sing and drink together – until Monday morning, when, having returned to their respective trenches, they again began the sadly tedious business of attempting to kill each other.

A story comes out of one of those Sunday afternoon shared picnics in the middle of the crater-pocked No Man's Land. A German soldier and an American soldier were together. The American soldier happened to be able to read and speak German. And he noticed the belt buckle on the German's uniform, a very large belt buckle that you usually only associate these days with people from Texas, and on it was written the phrase "Gott mit Uns." The American soldier was truly startled, for the German phrase, of course, means "*God is with us.*" And he said, looking genuinely puzzled, "*No – God*

is on **our** side.”

It is especially challenging – but for that very reason also especially *necessary* – that *particularly* in times of war, you and I try to think well about what it means to be a citizen and a Christian, what it means both to love one’s country and to love one’s God; to think about what the duties you or I owe the state, the nation versus what duties we owe to God or to church. And , of course, what do we do when these might seem to conflict? How do we know whose side God is on? And who are we called to be as Christians, loyal to the Lord who is the Prince of Peace and commands us to love our enemies and forgive those who hurt us, and yet who is also the one who said “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”?

The earliest Christians from late New Testament times through well into the fourth century for the most part chose this way: they said that their **only** loyalty was to God through Jesus Christ and they would neither swear an oath of allegiance to the Roman Emperor nor would they fight as draftees in the Roman army. The early church was, by and large, pacifist. If you ever wondered why there was so much persecution of Christians in the first few centuries, those are the reasons. Their answer to these questions about church and state was entirely on the side of church. And they died by the thousands because of it. Other Christians, in every time and place, have sometimes chosen the completely opposite point of view. A little over a century ago, for example, one national church leader said this in regards to the Spanish-American War: It is “the Lord’s way of pointing us to our national duty and destiny”¹

My friends, I don’t think either extreme is the correct one. And while I have no

¹J.H. Garrison, editor, The Christian-Evangelist. Cited in Charles Blaisdell, "The Attitude of The Christian-Evangelist Toward the Spanish-America War," Encounter 50:3, Summer 1989, p 239. Another Garrison quote is even more disturbing: Admiral Dewey's victory at Manilla was "thrilling," an example of the great spiritual conflict, of the ships of Zion, panoplied with the armorplate of righteousness...." Ibid., pp. 238-239.

final answers to the questions confront us on this topic, let me simply offer some of what is on my heart about how you and I can think about the relationship between church and state, the relationship between our duties as Christians and our duties as citizens, how to think about both patriotism and faith. I offer the following for your reflection:

Let me start, oddly, with *barbecue*. I have come to have a rule; here it is: **“Every barbecue is good”** rule. In my younger days, I was known to say things like *“The only real barbecue is to be found in Kansas City.”* Now, of course, for some, those are fighting words. Diehard devotees of barbecue can spend an enormous amount of time, passion, and words on the **“real”** way to do barbecue. Is sauce to be put on the meat while smoking it? Kansas City-style aficionados would say “of course,” while west Tennessee-style barbecue-lovers would sneeringly say that’s not **real** barbecue. In southeast Missouri I once bit into a chopped barbecue sandwich only to find that it had a layer of coleslaw on top, something I had never encountered (and hope never to again) and when I asked I was told this is the only **“real”** way to do barbecue. Is **“real”** barbecue beef, or pork, or goat?

But here’s the deal: when I say *“The only **real** barbecue is to be found in Kansas City”* – or when my Missouri or Tennessee or south Texas friends say something similar – I am not saying that is literally true. That would be silly. That kind of usage is really what someone has called a “doxological” usage. That’s the adjective form of something we do every Sunday; we sing the Doxology. Which means, literally, “giving praise and thanks.” So with that in mind, testimonies to the “realness” of this or that barbecue are actually not to be taken *literally*, but instead express the speaker’s thanks, if you will, for having been able to eat such wonderful food, and praise for how good it was, and, if not life changing, how very, very much it added to his life’s gustatory

pleasures.

Because the *literal* truth is really this: **All barbecue can be good.** Lloyd Stone and Georgia Harkness offered their own version of the “All barbecue is good” rule, but in a **theological** context, one that reminds us that what is true about barbecue is most assuredly true about faith and love of country. Hear their words from their hymn entitled “This Is My Song”:

This is my home, the country where my heart is
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

O hear my song, thou God of all the nations
A song of peace, for their land and for mine.²

Now, does this mean that what any country does is therefore right or good? Are all “hopes and dreams” equally worthy? Most assuredly not; history and current events obviously sadly demonstrate otherwise. But what Harkness’ and Stone’s theological version of the barbecue rule should always remind us is that it is *never necessary to hate another country because we love our own.* It should remind us that God is indeed the God of all the nations, and that God would weep when **any** of those nations do harmful, hurtful, unjust, or even horrific things. We are reminded that we ought never find ourselves unintentionally sliding from saying “*I love my country*” to anything like the statement “*My country is the only real one, the only worthy one, the only good one.*”

So, shall we celebrate our country’s birthday tomorrow? Absolutely, and with thanksgiving. But ought we then or ever, to use a wonderfully apt Hawaiian phrase, “talk stink” about another country just because of who they are or the *mere fact that they are not us?* No – lest we violate the commandment against bearing false witness. We ought always indeed seek to call our own nation and other nations to actions which

²Lloyd Stone and Georgia Harkness, “This Is My Song,” in The Chalice Hymnal (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995), # 722

are good, just, and worthy; we ought to criticize *any* country's actions which are hurtful or oppressive. Do you hear the difference? God has beloved children in every land, every nation. Sometimes those nations do wrong things. And sometimes we may need to fight those, even to the point of war. But as those who would be **both** citizens and Christians, we must always do so with both the "barbecue rule" in mind and the reminder that in every nation, in every land indeed "*Got mit Uns.*" Otherwise we run the risk of subtly demonizing and objectifying those persons, thinking of them as not fully human beings but simply and only as "the enemy."

In fact, the possibility of human beings sinfully demonizing and objectifying others, is why the church very early in its life formulated what are called "The Just War" principles. The Church took seriously that we live in an imperfect world, that the Kingdom has not yet come, and, sadly, sometimes nations may have to as a last resort go to war. But the "Just War Principles" were a way to keep in mind that war is always a tragedy in God's eyes and that as Christians we are called never to fight in a way that denies the humanity of others or treats them as sub-human. And so these Principles included, among other things, the principles that the cause of the war must be a moral one, and that any response to an attack must always and only be "proportionate" to the attack – for the fact that you have the sheer *power* to hurt more than is necessary does not mean that you *may* do so. These Just War Principles also included the principle that every effort must be made to protect the lives of those who were not soldiers, particularly women and children who are often any society's most vulnerable, as well as the principle that every "enemy combatant" is to be treated with dignity. Now to some folks, it has sounded weird that there are to be "rules" of war. But it is not weird, it is absolutely **essential**. For NOT to try to fight both honorably and with an awareness that the other side always are also children of God can and has led to atrocities on every side in too many wars throughout history. And, what's more, to fight honorably

and with an awareness that the other side are also made up of children of God is the only way that our young soldiers can fight and win and also be at peace in their souls.

My friends, even though there is much more that we could say, and much more that we could no doubt discuss together on another occasion about this topic, let me close this way: While I am obviously warning myself and any of us never to **identify** the church and the nation as the same thing, there is one thing they have in common that is remarkable and is, in fact, the source of their deepest strength for both. In the case of both the United States and the Church, what we have in common is that our truest and deepest and most abiding and most honorable power comes from our **words**, our ideas and ideals, not our might. Writer John Gunther once said of the United States, "*Ours is the only country deliberately founded on a good idea*"³ And the writer of the Gospel of John thought so highly of the power of words that he called Jesus Himself "the Word," a Word which was there working even at the dawn of creation. And Gunther's remark is indeed right: the United States of America was the only country deliberately founded on the power of **words**: words like freedom, equality, and justice for all. Those are the words that lie deepest in our bones, they are the fount from which all our patriotism flows. Those words are the deepest reason for our pride, not our might or our strength. Has America always lived up to the ideals embodied in the power of those words? No. But do those words themselves continue to live on, challenging us, before God, to correct what needs correcting and more fully live them out? Thanks be to God, they do indeed and they have indeed.

But let one far more eloquent than I say it. That great patriot and Christian, Martin Luther King, Jr., is the one whose powerful, powerful words, I return to every July 4. Sinner and saint, as we all are, patriot with sometimes clay feet as with us all, King

³http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/ours_is_the_only_country_deliberately_founded_on/157307.html

nonetheless reminds us of **who** we are as Americans and **whose** we are as Christians.

Can you hear him in your mind saying these familiar words?

...we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us [never] seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred....I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." ...I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.... This is our hope. ... With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.... This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"⁴

May it be so, may it be so. Amen.

⁴<http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>