

The Republic for Which It Stands *Deuteronomy 10:17-21* | 7/1/2018

Old American flags are pricy, especially if they're tattered and worn, and only have 35 stars, or any number of stars less than 50. In May of last year, a 13-star American flag used in James Buchanan's 1856 presidential candidacy run set an auction record when it sold to a Pennsylvania antique business for \$275,000. It's not uncommon for historical U.S. flags to sell for more than \$20,000, particularly if they have fewer stars than the current version and are from the era before 1912 when the federal government standardized the design.

When it comes to putting a value on *old* Old Glories, it's actually better if the flags show age and usage, which makes flags an anomaly in the world of collectibles, where for most things, "mint condition" increases value. When it comes to flags, early vintage, faded colors and obvious wear and tear push the cost up.

Of course, the U.S. Congress established the flag for our nation as an emblem of national identity. We recall this every time we say the Pledge of Allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands ..." In common speech, we often refer to our form of government as a democracy, but technically, it's a democratic republic, which means it is a country governed by elected representatives.

All of this may be of some interest this week with Independence Day, which celebrates our flag and the republic for which it stands. It's not a religious holiday, to be sure, but we church people, along with our fellow citizens, benefit from our nation's independence. So on this Sunday right before July 4, we have good reason to think about the things Independence Day represents and how they interact with our faith.

While we can gratefully acknowledge that many ideals of the Christian heritage informed the foundations of our country, there's always a danger in equating Christianity and our republic. They are not the same thing. And when we mash them together, some things can be done for political or national reasons, which, in fact, God would not condone, let alone bless.

We should also remember that the political system under which Christianity was born was an imperial form of government with an all-powerful Caesar at its head. Further, many, if not most, of the world's Christians today live under other forms of government, many of which are repressive. More Christians, for example, worship on any given Sunday in China than in all of Europe.

Having said that, however, we can recognize that it is far easier -- and certainly less risky -- to be a Christian under our government which explicitly claims in principle to limit government interference in religion. Our government declares it will "make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise" of religion. So it is right and proper that here in church, we should be thankful that we live in our republic, and we should pray for those Christians who face persecution under other kinds of government.

Let's also remember that our republic has done a great service for Christians. Our civil liberties, the Bill of Rights, the freedom of minorities, our right to dissent and even the separation of church and state, all contribute to an environment where it is safe and, in some cases, even popular to be Christians. So well does our republic serve us in our faith, as well as in most parts of our lives, that we generally take it for granted. But today, let's think about the principles of our representative democracy that have Christian equivalents.

The first is that representative democracy, like Christianity, puts values on individuals. Abraham Lincoln called our system "a government of the people, by the people, for the people." Our government operates on the idea that an individual (who has sometimes been called "the smallest minority") should have an influential voice in *how* they are governed and *who* governs them.

This matter of how persons are viewed is a fundamental difference between our constitutional republic and other forms of government. Although most governments -- including many dictatorships -- claim to exist for the good of "the people," the political philosophy founding our government says that the purpose of government is to secure the rights that God endowed to individuals. This is not a trivial difference, especially since words such as "democracy" and "the people" have widely differing and even contrary meanings at times. Consider, for example, that North Korea's official name is "People's Democratic Republic of Korea").

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 speaks of God as one who values persons. God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, ... loves the stranger." And Jesus, speaking about the Sabbath rules, said, "People were not made for the good of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for the good of the people" (Mark 2:27, CEV).

In 2004, our Supreme Court ruled that the prisoners from Afghanistan and Iraq held at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay could not be held indefinitely without legal recourse. They must be allowed legal representation. Where individuals are valued, we cannot arbitrarily deny rights to some individuals.

A second parallel is that both Christianity and representative democracies recognize a loyalty higher than to the state. As people who are governed by laws and required to pay taxes, we might think that a republic tolerates no other loyalty but, in fact, it does. Our founders built in a system of checks and balances so that no part of the government should become too powerful. Under our Constitution, there is built-in tolerance for choices made by individual conscience, protected by our Bill of Rights and by the courts. Our government allows opposition parties. It protects free speech, even when such speech is critical of our government and its officials.

The New Testament advises followers of Jesus to be good citizens, but it reminds us that we are citizens of a higher world as well. The Christian who wrote the book of Hebrews talked about Old Testament people of faith who lived on promises of a homeland to come. They died, the writer said, without yet seeing it, but knowing they were "foreigners on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). In earthbound terms, this means that when our citizenship in God's kingdom tells us that something our government is doing is wrong, then that higher allegiance is our authority to speak up and act.

A third parallel is that both our democracy and Christianity, when practiced rightly, care not only about the liberty of individuals, but also about their equality. Equality as an ideal was stated boldly in our Declaration of Independence -- "All men are created equal" -- but it took three amendments to the Constitution (13, 15 and 19), as well as the Civil Rights Act, to extend that to all people. No one, by reason of ancestry or position, is to be considered better or worse than others. Note that this means equality under the law. In America today, equality still sometimes falls through the proverbial cracks, but the ideal is there in our system of government, and that is a big difference between a democracy and a dictatorship.

This egalitarian impulse is echoed in our faith. Consider the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, which reminds us that Jesus did not consider the rich of more worth than the poor. When Peter explained Christianity to the Gentiles gathered at the house of Cornelius, one of the things he said was that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34).

Here's a final parallel: *For Christianity and democracy to work, they both need responsible citizens.* The point should be obvious. But consider what happens to a republic when its citizens won't run for public office, won't vote, won't work for the common good, duck paying taxes and mistreat others. Now consider what happens when Christians won't volunteer at the church, won't give to the church, won't practice their faith, won't love their neighbors.

Christians everywhere are citizens of two countries, one on earth and one in eternity. Our two citizenships can neither be fully united nor fully separated. We cannot withdraw from the world and pretend we are somehow dwelling only in the commonwealth of God now; nor can we simply embrace the world and assume earthly governments fulfill God's will. Those are extremes, and they are unbiblical.

The kingdom of God and a democratic republic are not the same thing and should not be confused with each other. But good governments impose a necessary structure on life and help to restrain evil practices. And our form of government, while far from perfect, provides a framework for a good life and the free practice of our faith.

There have been efforts every so often to remove the phrase "under God" from our Pledge of Allegiance. Many of us are glad those words are there. But when we say "one nation under God," we should do so humbly, never implying that America is God's chosen country over all others. All people everywhere are invited to be in God's kingdom, but some governmental structures lend themselves to the free exercise of faith better than others.

Let us thank God for the flag under which we live, the republic for which it stands, and the freedom it makes possible. And let us strive to be good citizens of this country, knowing that as we work for the common good of all, we are being good citizens of God's kingdom as well.

Pastor Keith