

**The Challenge of Patriotism**  
A Sermon Preached on July 6, 2003  
At Hanover Street Presbyterian Church  
By the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, Ph.D.

Texts:

**1 Samuel 8: 4-18**

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only--you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.

**Psalms 118: 1-9**

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.

On the street where I live neighbors display flags to decorate their homes and welcome passers-by. There are all kinds of flags. The Davises, for instance, have a flag for fall, featuring a large, burnt orange pumpkin; a flag for wintertime, with a flying angel blowing a trumpet; a flag for springtime, with a large iris blossom and

bumblebee; and a flag for summer, showing a stylistic sailboat with bright blue and red spinnaker.

Since nine-one-one there are a lot more American flags in my neighborhood. On a street adjoining mine, that's about all you see : Old Glories fluttering above every doorstep. I own several American flags, but I haven't flown once since that tragic day that changed the world. I haven't, because I can't get on the bandwagon. I can't stomach patriotism anymore, at least not the variety that seems to have sprung up like poison mushrooms overnight.

On July the fourth, Alice and I were sitting by the Christiana River waiting for the fireworks to begin. Songs to inspire patriotic fervor were playing over the loud speakers--not the old standbys, like "America the Beautiful," and "My Country T'is of Thee," reverent songs like that, but rather, belligerent ballyhoos. We heard a country music singer jubilantly proclaiming what it means to be an American: It means--he actually sang this--putting your boot up the behind of anyone who resists the American way. I couldn't believe it. I thought: "Where am I? Is this my country?"

My sermon is entitled, "The Challenge of Patriotism." Patriotism, the love of country, or the passion to serve one's country, has always been a moral and spiritual challenge to people who worship an almighty God. Samuel, the prophet, understood that well. His people wanted a king, so that they could be like other nations. He warned them sternly. A king, he said, will surely conscript your sons into his army; he will force your daughters to do his household chores; he will take the best produce from your flocks and fields for himself and his courtiers. Watch out, he warned them. Mind what you're getting into! You will never be free in the ways you have been before, never ever again.

But despite Samuel's protestations his people would not be dissuaded. They by God wanted a king! So Samuel anointed one for them, Saul. By that ritual which conferred God's blessing upon a newly recognized royal leader, you could say that the people of Israel signed over their birth right. Also, by making for themselves a king, they had begun mingling commitments to God and country in a morally dangerous way. It took their spiritual descendants (and we Christians are among them) more than two thousand years, from the anointing of Saul to the repudiation of the divine right of kings by the Magna Carta--all that time to disentangle religious faith from allegiance to royalty. Do not put your faith in princes, but in God, our featured psalmist of this morning warned the people of Israel. But they had to learn their lesson the hard way, by surrendering fundamental freedoms which their Creator had given them at birth.

On July the fourth, we citizens of the United States of America celebrate taking those freedoms back. As our Declaration of Independence from King George of England says:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all [people] are created equal, that they

are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In declaring this, our fore-patriots had in mind a particular agenda, of course: breaking away from oppressive mother England. But their determination to accomplish this agenda was expressed in such universal terms that their Declaration of Independence became a manifesto for human rights, not just American ones. When our forebears said that they believed God created all people equal, and endowed all people with inalienable rights, obviously they were speaking not just about Americans, but human beings in general, of whatever nationality. Therefore, our Declaration of Independence presents for any American patriot today a moral challenge, namely this: Will we Americans seek to promote for everyone everywhere the rights which our Declaration of Independence insists are universal, or will we rationalize restricting them only to Americans and others who pledge allegiance to us?

These days I'm squeamish about hanging Old Glory on my front porch because I don't know what kind of statement I'll be making to passers-by. If I do decide to show the flag, I want my neighbors to understand what I mean by it. I don't want them to think that I agree with the present administration's illegal revocation of certain civil rights of American citizens under the dubious rationale of national defense. And I certainly don't want them to think that I'm proud about my country putting its boot up the behind of any country not willing to bow to its will.

Such behavior seems to me patently un-American. Some critics will say that I am naive, that America has acted that way all along; it's just more blatant now. Wake up and smell the stink. Well, I'm not that cynical, at least, not yet. I still do believe that God inspired our fore-patriots with a vision far grander than their own national agenda. And I believe that if we open our hearts and minds to that morally grander vision, we will be able to discern the difference between the self-righteous chauvinism which parades as patriotism these days, and a kinder, gentler patriotism which recognizes that "there are other hearts in other lands that beat with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine."