

# Patriotism and Faith

A sermon for May 24, 2009

by Jim Evans

This is a big Memorial Day Sunday for me, because after a long and turbulent journey, I'm surprising myself and delivering a brief sermon on patriotism. I'm in favor of it, in case any of you are wondering. And since I'm speaking in a church, I'll be connecting patriotism and faith. But please understand, words like patriotism and faith are so fraught, so loaded, that to think about them, we need to agree on meanings for them, at least for today. And also please understand, I'm presenting my own unauthorized thoughts here. First, in the name of full disclosure, you deserve to know some background.

I was raised in a Republican farming family. My mother's family, having descended directly from the Puritans, was conservative in every way. For a long time, leftist politics hardly existed for me, and certainly held no excitement, but then a young lawyer who loved America somehow outsmarted a crime-friendly, rotten dictator, won a revolution against that dictator's mafia-style government, and took over his country. It sounded like Robin Hood's little band beating the Sheriff of Nottingham's superior forces once and for all. This Robin Hood's name was Fidel, and the government he replaced was so corrupt that he was treated in the USA as something of a hero.

This may have planted a seed, but at the time, Sr. Castro didn't influence me very much. I was more concerned about soon going to high school, which sounded huge and intimidating. I mean, my graduating class had almost 100 people in it.

Being a fairly typical young person, I needed to rebel sometime, and in college, I guess the seed sprouted. Anti-war activities appealed to the young idealist in me. My then-girlfriend and I organized and led the very first mass student demonstration ever held on our college campus. We were featured on the news, and we scandalized our elders. Many of us found that leftist politics and horrifying our professors and parents brought us deep satisfaction.

But experience is a wonderful teacher, isn't it? Today — only a few years later — I talk with my 91-year-old mom about politics and religion and find that we usually agree. How did that happen? Much of what follows comes originally from our conversations.

For instance, have you noticed that political parties and religious denominations have similar social features? If they're healthy, both welcome a wide variety of viewpoints and opinions. Enforcement of a strict orthodoxy, and a preoccupation with the rules, is usually a sign of stagnation rather than growth, weakness rather than strength. If they're healthy, churches and parties both recruit membership from all orientations of race, ethnicity, gender, and ability.

As in churches, welcoming and respecting argument is essential to political health. Pundits from both major parties are guilty of exaggerating and misrepresenting statements from the opposition, and both parties, at their extremes, have real wackos to entertain us all, but most of us have learned that the truth lies somewhere in between, and even the brightest and most reasonable among us is not always right. Still, a strong and healthy system, religious or secular, protects the free speech of all, including the wackos.

No government and no administration is perfect. We don't want either our religious leaders or our President to think they're always right, and we also need to discourage their most ardent fans from thinking so.

I enjoyed a recent joke from our President, when he used a Genesis reference to poke fun at the silliness of Obama-mania: "I'm going to be so efficient in the next 100 days that I'm going to finish them in 72. And on the seventy-third day, I will rest."

Of course, Mr. Obama was reminding us that our expectations could get all of us into trouble. He has already said, more than once, that he's always ready to be proved wrong by anyone with a clear argument.

Leadership like this, from any party, once again gives me hope for this country and makes me proud to be an American. Which is to say, I feel patriotic. I may say, "My country, right or wrong," but pointing out what looks wrong is patriotic, an act of love. We had a spell there when criticizing our government and its policies was taken as unpatriotic. This embarrassed me for my party and my country.

True patriotism can't be uncritical. Those for whom our new President can do no wrong have fallen into the same trap as those who unfailingly supported our previous President.

Let's look at how faith is like mature patriotism. I don't want you to think that radical politics was any more than a very small part of my college experience. Much bigger and more important was the hardest course I ever took. The Methodist assistant pastor for campus ministries offered it free of charge. I had to leave campus and go downtown to the church for this, and the reading load was crushing. I got neither grades nor credits toward graduation. But what I learned has given me a foundation to build my religious faith upon.

You know how you can study economics and years later come up with nothing but the concept of supply and demand? Well, after that course in religious philosophy 45 years ago, here's the main thing I remember: the difference between faith and belief.

Belief is like the dead-end kind of patriotism; you know, the kind that has a person saying, "I know what I know. Don't confuse me with the facts." Belief is absolute conviction without scientific proof. Blind belief makes people say, "Let's keep science out of this," or even, "We must teach creationism in our schools." Cynical critics call this magical thinking and mock believers for taking as literal truth such ideas as a talking snake, a 6,500-year-old universe, or John's visions of the Apocalypse.

Faith, on the other hand, involves questioning. Faith wants to grow. A person of faith questions all the time. A person of faith always harbors doubt. Like an enlightened patriot, the faithful person welcomes good arguments and is willing to change, to grow. Yes, this is challenging; this is risky. One may have to abandon a cherished idea. A life of faith, defined this way, can feel like a high wire act.

But it's I'm here to tell you, it's exciting, and rewarding. If I lived by belief alone, I'd want pretty much the same comfortable sermon every Sunday, no changes in the worship service, and no new members. There are churches like that. Everybody grows old together, and the church dies with them. That's not how I want to live, not in my church, not in my country.

Applying my faith to my patriotism, I've had to confront my youthful belief that anyone who participates in war is automatically evil. That was my belief, and it was as static and self-restricting as any belief can be. I had to grow up, drop that attitude, and ask more questions. Of course, once I confronted facts, I could see that the men and women of our armed forces deserve our respect, admiration, and awe for what they do. The war or mission they carry out may be questionable, but that's another debate. The people doing the work usually do their best to do it well and honorably, at great risk, and they deserve our respect and thanks.

And if we were to apply our faith to our patriotism, we would, of course, support the United States of America as a Christian nation, but that term, Christian nation, has so many meanings that it's often misunderstood. Let's agree that a Christian nation takes seriously the example of the Jew we call the Messiah, and opens its arms to people of all nations and faiths in the spirit of the poem of another Jew, Emma Lazarus, that's on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Would Jesus turn away immigrants because they're poor and don't speak the language? Would Jesus wish all these Buddhists and Muslims and Hindus would just stay home? Jesus, himself neither Christian nor white, honored the potential for good in everyone. Let's agree that a Christian nation does at least that much.

If this were a real Christian nation, wouldn't we demand that our government imitate Christ? We'd take seriously the adage that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and we'd make our nation truly strong by taking good care of our poor. The health coverage enjoyed by those in public office would extend to the rest of us. The Katrina victims would have been taken care of long ago. Environmental laws meant to conserve God's creation would have grown stronger in the past few years rather than weaker.

And if this were a Christian nation, the veterans who come home wounded in body and mind wouldn't have to drag themselves through tangles of red tape and up mountains of forms just to prove they *deserve* help, let alone actually get it. If this were really a Christian nation, I wouldn't be standing here reminding you of the soldiers who lost body parts or their emotional stability after getting blown up while driving over a bridge in Baghdad and can't get help because our government tells them the accident didn't happen in combat. Would Jesus do that? Our Viet Nam vets had to endure the same indignity, and worse. Rather, if this were fully a Christian nation, our government would rush to administer the best treatment a grateful country might offer its richest citizen. For putting them in harm's way, we owe them nothing less.

This isn't really tough talk. Here comes the hard part. Wouldn't the example of Jesus have us treat even the prisoners in Guantanamo with love? According to psychology experts who know about such things, solitary confinement may be the most diabolical and permanently damaging form of torture, yet we do it very casually to them and to our own citizens. Something to think about, as we examine our faith and patriotism. How far from Jesus have we slid?

As if all this weren't enough to consider, tomorrow is Memorial Day. I've been bending your ear about remembering the living, and Memorial Day is traditionally about the armed service people we've lost.

I like to think they'd like what many of us do on Memorial Day Weekend, such as, weather permitting, work on the garden, watch a parade, have a cookout, or somehow enjoy the day off, have a good time, and unofficially declare the arrival of summer.

I know that lots of folks say, "When I'm gone, just get together and have a party. Enjoy yourselves. Enjoy each other." Well, that's exactly what we're doing, isn't it, and when we do, let's hold the thought of why we're doing it, and let's remember a little prayer of thanks that we can enjoy this good time partly thanks to the sacrifice of thousands of military men and women.

And let's pray that our leaders behave more like the example of Christ, so that some day, we may not have to sacrifice so many of our young citizens.