

Primary Allegiance (Hebrews 11:1, 8-10, 13-16)

As a kid living in Anaheim, CA I remember being glad that Independence Day happened in summer, because the day would be sunny, filled with swimming, eating hamburgers off the grill, and playing table tennis for hours—we never called it ping pong, Dad would cringe at that term. All of that was the warm-up for the main event when it got dark enough for fireworks. Mind you, this was last century when you could still shoot off fireworks at your house. Dad would have picked up an assortment of what were called “safe and sane” fireworks—I did wonder what “insane” fireworks might be; probably cherry bombs and M80’s, we never had those—we had the tamer variety, meaning that when it came time, my sister and I, armed with sparklers, would sit on the curb in front of our house and watch Dad set off our collection one by one. We lived on a long street filled with families like ours, and one of the added benefits of the evening was that we enjoyed watching our neighbors’ fireworks as well. After our collection was spent, we would gather in the front yard and begin the countdown waiting for the Disneyland fireworks display which we could see from our house. They were always good, but on the 4th of July, they were spectacular. The grand finale that lit up the sky marked the end of a great day full of delight. It was fun to be an American.

Part of me still longs for that again—it was a time of innocence and wonder; we never discussed the meaning of the day, we just enjoyed it. In that respect, it’s kind of a bummer to grow up when reason and informed thought begin to crowd the innocence. Not that it completely vacates the celebration, but it does reserve space in your thought where you realize that as good as it is to live in this country, it’s not perfect, and some of the not perfect aspects cast a long shadow over its history.

Being a Christ follower adds another layer of reflection to the equation that can lead to thorny dilemmas. My generation grew up in a time when being a Christian and being American was essentially equivalent. Even if one didn’t attend church, Christianity was the civil religion of the United States and most folks were sympathetic to the ideals of Christian belief as the basic foundation for ethics and morality even apart from professed faith in its specific tenets. In some expressions of the church, the notion of a Christian nation went to the place where theology developed around the idea that the United States was the new promised land, replacing Israel as the chosen people and viewing the US as having a special relationship with God that granted God’s direct blessing. That didn’t gain a large following then, but it laid the foundation for what’s developed in our day as Christian Nationalism.

But we’re not the same nation today in terms of sympathy for Christian ideals. We live in a pluralistic culture where Christianity is one of several world-views competing for place and priority. And that’s not all bad—in fact, that’s precisely the situation which the church, the gathered followers of Jesus, faced in its inception. There were a host of philosophies and religions available in the first century. The followers of Jesus had no cultural history to draw upon, no power to wield, no political agency to rely upon or exercise, and little popular sympathy for its ideals—actually there developed intensifying antipathy for Christian thought which sought to stamp out its fledgling existence. Yet it flourished, and as a movement it swept across the Roman Empire and gained traction among the variety of cultures present in that day.

Given the similarity in our present situation to that of the early Christian community, how do we hold in tension our allegiance to Christ and our celebration of a good, but imperfect nation in which we’re invested, and whose success we hope for without fusing them together in a mixed marriage of sorts which benefits neither?

Part of the answer to that is to reflect on scripture passages that informed the thought of the early church which helped them to thrive, one of which Pastor Andrea read for us moments ago. The author of Hebrews encouraged Christ followers then to consider the importance of faith and how that played out in the lives of notable figures in biblical history. The writer began this survey with a quick definition of faith as confidence in what has been promised, by implication, from God that leads, again by implication, to trust. In this sense trust means acting in a manner consistent with our confidence. The particular example of Abraham cites his trust—faith in action—when in response to God’s direction he moved to a place

promised as an inheritance. While there he lived a nomadic experience, living in tents rather than a permanent dwelling as he anticipated what God would produce—the direction came from God, and so did the timing. Abraham died well before the promised outcome, having still lived as a nomad—a temporary existence, yet confident of God’s faithfulness. He and his descendants after him were longing for a better country—the one of God’s making with God’s presence, in shorthand: a heavenly one. As a brief side-note, this idea is what Jesus was speaking to in John 8 where he’s recorded as telling the Jewish leaders, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

The biblical record tells the story of how that promise unfolded over time, which came to include a nation—a political entity with borders and government—but that was never intended to be an end unto itself. Israel was to be a model and instrument to demonstrate the sensibility of living in harmony with God, and subsequently how that would result in harmony with others, with the intent of compelling the world’s attention resulting in other nations coming to receive the blessings Israel enjoyed for themselves as they accepted Israel’s God as their own. Israel was to display the reality of God’s presence testifying to the spiritual realm pervading the physical. But the human element was the unpredictable variable in this partnership that would eventually impede the outcome. Even under direct engagement with God, they stumbled more often than not. The record shows the tendency to allow their own design and understanding to override God’s direction.

Jesus himself had to patiently reiterate his teaching about the kingdom of God for even his own disciples failed to separate the reign or rule of God from the idea of a political model. To the day of his ascension, they still labored under the impression that Jesus would somehow restore the kingdom to Israel. Nation-states and the system of government they employ are necessary, even God-ordained elements to regulate human community. But they are secondary to the kingdom Christ leads that transcends borders intent on being a global enterprise that includes people from all nations as Paul declared in his benediction to the Romans that the mystery of Christ’s revelation through the proclamation of his gospel is that all nations might believe and obey him to the glory of God. As Christ followers we are primarily citizens of his kingdom, his realm, and secondarily citizens of the particular nation in which we live.

We do celebrate our nation’s founding and independence, and in that we can rightfully give thanks to God for the many benefits we enjoy as Christ followers who live in a country that allows for the free exercise of religion—a critical piece of our nation’s founding conviction—a freedom from state-sanctioned belief, but more importantly we have freedom for pursuing the exercise of faith that seeks the welfare of all in line with the values enshrined in the teaching of Christ. To that end we can celebrate the way our nation has contributed to the welfare of its people and shared its resources abroad; how it has come to the aid of others and been beneficial. Yet as we do so, we must also bear in mind its flaws and imperfections, honestly confessing that it has not always or fully lived into its ideals, that it hasn’t always been a benefit to other nations in the world and that our actions and objectives have sometimes been short-sighted causing hardship at home and abroad. In light of this, we pray for forgiveness and insight, discernment and wise counsel to learn from our past as we face an increasingly complex future.

This is patriotism, to recognize the awesome opportunities our nation offers while bearing responsibility for stewarding our American experiment in ways that equally benefit all who live here and for those abroad who gain benefit from its bounty. Christ followers are well-equipped for this as we have a heart for the well-being of all while being aware of the human propensity towards sin which can undercut our ideals.

The lessons of our text inform our self-understanding and worldview to these ends: First, we live by faith, in God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Our ultimate confidence and trust are in the faithfulness of God who will bring about what has been promised regardless of the present landscape. We act in a manner consistent with our confidence—God’s grace is sufficient for this. Our trust as Christ followers is in him, not a country or political party. Second, we live in the reality of the temporary while anticipating the reality of the eternal, and we resist the temptation to allow the contingencies of the lesser reality to sunder the unity of the greater.

The issues of the day are not unimportant, but neither are they more important than what God is bringing about. We use the political agency available to us to effect our best understanding of how to promote the welfare of all, for that alone rather than what we might hope to gain in the process. This is a means for loving neighbors as ourselves. Third, we give attention to the immediate and pray towards the ultimate. We recognize the scope of our ability and influence and work within it with God's help. We realize and accept that the outcome we hope for may occur beyond our lifetime—change takes time. Pay attention to what's directly before us and pray about what's beyond our grasp. Finally, let your longing for God's best lead you ever forward into what's better in the meantime. God's splendor will display through you and our nation will gain benefit thereby—may that be true for our nation, and all the nations of the world. AMEN