

“I Pledge Allegiance...”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

Not Proud

About a week and a half ago was July 4th, Independence Day for the United States of America. While fireworks and flags abound on this holiday in honor and celebration of the United States of America, I couldn't help but notice that many people I know were not feeling particularly patriotic this July 4th. And this is completely understandable. We, as a country are doing some absolutely abhorrent things right now, so I get the tendency to speak out against it, and to want to distance ourselves from it. I'm not particularly proud to be an American right now, and my guess is I'm not the only one who feels that way.

However.

As much as I can call a place home, this country is it. I am not indigenous; my people are immigrants to this land. It is not mine. But I am its. I do not own it, but I am *of* it. I am an American.

The Problem with Patriotism

Now, I found myself a bit at-odds on July 4th, trying to reconcile my American identity with the lack of pride that I was feeling towards my country. And part of why I was having trouble identifying as a “patriotic American” is as much a problem with the word patriotic, as it is with being an American.

In our current political climate, the concept of Patriotism, it seems to me, has been co-opted. While I have always understood it to mean “love of one's country”, I often hear self-described “Patriots” using the term to promote the very ideologies that I find so abhorrent and believe to be ruining this country (and many lives in it). And so, if my ideological opponents are claiming “Patriotism”, then I wanted nothing to do with it.

And then, I had what I *thought* was a clever idea: I would do just the opposite of distancing myself from Patriotism. I would attempt to reconcile my own negative feelings towards this country by *reclaiming* Patriotism. And that, *Reclaiming Patriotism*, was the original title and idea for today's sermon.

I was excited about this thought, and eager to share it. So when I told Susan Peck what I was planning to talk about, the cringe that I received was not exactly the reaction I was expecting.

See, I had naïvely thought that the problem with patriotism was with who was claiming it and using it. But Susan pointed out that the word itself, and the very concept of patriotism, is problematic.

Once pointed out, it seemed so obvious that I don't know how I missed it before: But Patriotism comes from the same Greek root as Patriarchy. They are both related to male dominance, ownership and control of land and social systems.

So, as it turns out, Patriotism isn't really worth reclaiming. We can just give up on trying to be Patriots; the other side can have it.

And while that's one less thing to fight about, there's still no shortage of conflict in America, and it's getting pretty ugly.

(Un)Civil War

We are in the middle of an Un-civil War, a war of words and attitudes, and sometimes physical violence. There is some speculation that an actual Civil War may be on the horizon for us.

Now I think that seems extreme. But the fact that the idea is even being tossed out there does speak to how deeply divided we are, ideologically, as a country.

And on this subject of being divided, Abraham Lincoln had some famous words. Prior to our *actual* Civil War, Abraham Lincoln delivered his *House Divided* speech in 1858, on an issue that threatened to divide the country at the time: slavery. In the speech, he said:

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.”¹

And ultimately, he was right. The issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 legally ended slavery everywhere in the United States; and two years later, in 1865, the War ended with the Union remaining intact.

I think chances are good that we will avoid another Civil War; but the level of vitriol we've seen between ideologically opposed groups may have some of us wondering what job prospects look like in Canada.

I'm not going to lie, sometimes I think back fondly on my trip to New Zealand last year and think, “Yeah, I could raise sheep.”

Redeeming the World

But then, I recall the words of Universalist minister Clarence Russell Skinner, who said, “Those who have faith in the world are the ones upon whom rests the tremendous responsibility of redeeming the world.”²

And that's us. Unitarian Universalism calls us to have faith in the world, and therefore, the responsibility rests on us to redeem it.

When it comes to our country, that responsibility is the same. We are called to redeem it, not run from it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

It's not easy. In fact, sometimes it downright dangerous. German Theologian and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up in Germany but went back and forth between the United States and Germany to teach. When World War II broke out, his friends and colleagues in the United States tried to get him to stay safely away from Germany during the war. At first, Bonhoeffer agreed. But after only a few months, out of a sense of duty, he changed his mind and returned to Germany. In a letter to friend and fellow theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer wrote:

¹ Lincoln, Abraham. *A House Divided*. <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>

² Skinner, Clarence Russell. *The Social Implications of Universalism*, p 50.

“I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”³

Bonhoeffer was executed in Germany when his plot to assassinate Hitler was discovered. But this was a person who felt such a strong call to redeem his country, that he sacrificed his safety in the United States, and ultimately lost his life doing what he thought he must to save his country and his people.

Now, let me be very clear: I am not advocating for violence as I means of fixing our problems here. But what I am emphasizing here is the commitment to care for what we love. And Bonhoeffer loved his country enough to return to it when it was dangerous to do so.

Colin Kaepernick

I see another example of someone who so loves his country that he’s willing to make sacrifices to redeem it.

In the fall of 2016, professional football player Colin Kaepernick opted not to stand for the national anthem during a preseason game. When asked about it, Colin responded:

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”⁴

Kaepernick then began taking a knee as a form of silent protest every time the anthem was played throughout the rest of the season. The next season, no NFL team would sign him to a contract.

Part-way through his protest season, Kaepernick pledged to donate one million dollars of his own money to non-profits who support oppressed communities. Despite not earning an income for the 2017 season since no one would sign him, Kaepernick made good on his pledge, completing his final set of ten 10,000 dollar donations in January of this year.

Now, leaving the country is only a possibility for those with enough financial and social mobility to do so. For some people, this country is the only option. There are no choice about where to live, only how to make it wherever they are.

Colin Kaepernick had it made. He was a starting quarterback in the NFL with a multi-million dollar contract. If he wanted to get out of the country that he feels treats people of color unjustly, he could’ve been on the next flight to anywhere in the world. Instead he has suffered incredible financial and personal losses.

And he has drawn sharp criticism from many, but perhaps most notably from the President of the United States, who suggested that Kaepernick, “should find another country that works better for him.”

In response, Kaepernick said:

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/06/21/archives/dietrich-bonhoeffer-a-life-that-meshed-with-the-rise-and-fall-of.html>

⁴ Wyche, Steve. <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000691077/article/colin-kaepernick-explains-protest-of-national-anthem>

“It’s a very ignorant statement that, if you don’t agree with what’s going on, hearing that if you want justice and liberty and freedom for all, then you should leave the country. He always says make America great again. Well, America has never been great for people of color. And that’s something that needs to be addressed. Let’s make America great for the first time.”⁵

That, my friends, is spoken like someone who loves his country.

Not Proud, But...

On July 4th, I did not feel proud to be an American. But as much as I’m not proud of my country right now, I love America. If I don’t care enough to stick around through the difficult times, I can’t expect anyone else to, and I certainly don’t get a say in how we rebuild it.

And this is what Skinner is talking about when he says, “Those who have faith in the world are the ones upon whom rests the tremendous responsibility of redeeming the world.”

Will you join me? Let’s redeem. Let’s rebuild. And let’s make America great for the first time.

May we make it so.

⁵ Graham, Bryan Armen. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/sep/27/colin-kaepernick-donald-trump-america-people-of-color>