

GOD OF ALL THE NATIONS
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14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Twelve years ago, in one of the biggest surprises of my life, Senator Robert Byrd personally invited me to tell him my views on the so-called “flag burning” amendment. I’ll tell you the whole story but first the lesson for today.

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you will reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. Galatians 6:7-10

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Today is July Fourth. All over America bands will march, fireworks will explode, hot dogs will sizzle and flags will wave. Flags will hang in many churches—but not in this house of worship.

Even though we love the flag and the republic for which it stands, we love something more. We love Christ, our Lord and Savior. We love and serve the One who calls us to love God above self, family, tribe and nation. And that’s not easy since our instinct is to settle for a love not as deep and wide as Christ offers.

Yes, we can love our country and its flag unconditionally, as we love our parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren. But we must not worship our children, parents or country. And therein lies a tricky trap.

On Friday, Sept. 11, 1998, Sen. Byrd invited me to sit with him on the sofa in his office. He wanted to hear my views on the proposed constitutional amendment that would make burning or desecrating the flag a criminal offense. The amendment was coming before Congress yet again.

On the surface the amendment sounds patriotic but it actually undermines one of our greatest freedoms, freedom of speech including dissent against the government. Most Senators do not want such an amendment to the Constitution; but they are afraid to vote against it. Imagine what an opponent could do in a television sound bite with a vote against “protecting the American flag.”

In 1998 Sen. Byrd was considered the “swing vote” and for the first time he was leaning toward supporting the amendment in part because so many ministers in West Virginia had urged him to vote for it in the name of “God and country.” The American Civil Liberties Union, more commonly known as the ACLU, contacted me to provide the Senator with an alternative Christian perspective. Tom Moses and Dave Ricks, two decorated veterans of WWII had volunteered to go as well.

The three of us traveled by train from Harpers Ferry to Washington. Tom and Dave strongly opposed the amendment. They had fought and risked their lives, they said, to protect our freedoms, including the right to burn our country’s flag. We met with Byrd’s staff for an hour and then were invited to meet the Senator himself, something we had not expected.

As we entered the Senator's main office, he was just leaving. But once he learned that we were West Virginians, and two WWII veterans at that, he stopped in his tracks and ordered his photographer to take a picture of us with him.

Tom and Dave quickly stepped up beside the Senator. I held my ground. The Senator pointed and motioned for me to come get in the picture. But I declined. My refusal disturbed the Senator and it showed.

Why won't you get in this picture?

With all do respect, Senator, I am a minister of the church and not your chaplain.

I guess I might have had in mind Billy Graham and how he had compromised his ministry and integrity by appearing too chummy with Nixon and other presidents. Not that I'm Billy Graham or that Byrd was Nixon. Not even close! But you get the idea.

Anyway, my refusal really peeved Senator Byrd. *Look*, he said, *I don't care if you are a minister. You are one of my constituents and I want you in this picture.* At that point I realized this was making a scene totally unrelated to the purpose of our visit. So I relented and got in the picture.

Well, as it turned out, my brief resistance aroused the Senator's curiosity. Although he was late for a meeting, he asked us to sit down and explain our views. When it came my turn I acknowledged his deep respect for the Constitution, the flag and the Bible. I mentioned that if burning a flag *desecrated* it then somehow it had been made *sacred*. And since the second commandment forbids us to make idols of anything we probably shouldn't turn the flag into an idol.

The Senator was quiet for a few moments and then said: *I never thought of it that way.* Then he thanked us for coming and left for his prior meeting.

When the vote was taken that fall, Sen. Byrd once again stood his ground against the silly amendment. To be sure, he had more reasons than one to vote against it.

I have long admired Sen. Byrd. I admire his wisdom and courage; but even more I admire his willingness to grow in humility and grace over the years, his willingness to admit wrong publicly and to ask for forgiveness. And, above all, I admire him for putting his love of God above his love of country.

Many years ago, Christ called Senator Byrd, as Christ calls us, to keep growing and growing in love. It's not enough to love self, family, tribe, or nation. Christ calls us to love all people, including our enemies, because God is love and all people are God's children.

So we don't display a flag in our house of prayer, in part, because we are not a *state* church but also because a flag in church has tempted many a citizen—from Spain to England, from Germany to our own country—to put nation above or beside God. It's not God *and* country. It's country *under* God as our pledge of allegiance puts it.

We are not a Christian nation and for that we should be glad. The wall of separation between church and state fixed in our Constitution is *one of the*, if not *the*, most brilliant insights of the founders. As the church in Nazi Germany discovered to its everlasting regret and shame, *patriotism joined with religion is a powerful and often deadly combination.* As Americans we love our country. But as Christians, as followers of Jesus, we must be vigilant lest we give our unconditional allegiance to anything less than God.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.
John Hancock and others. July 4, 1776.

All men are created equal.

The founders—like all inspired poets and prophets—said more than they meant. They might have meant *men* in a narrow sense but the spirit of that document meant *women*, too. They might have meant *white people* but the spirit of that document meant *people of color*, too. They might have meant *Americans only* but the spirit of that document meant *all people of every tribe and nation*.

The founders of this nation unwittingly resurrected the ancient vision of the peaceable kingdom—the world as a community of goods shared in communion with all peoples, tribes and nations. No wonder the “Declaration of Independence” has been a beacon of hope to the world. And that makes me so very, very proud to be an American.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people in all nations are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.

That faith and that conviction continue to haunt and inspire, to judge and inform our nation’s domestic and foreign policies. Yes, the world of politics is complicated and messy, but let us never, ever tire of working on and for the bold dream that called our nation into being.

As the Apostle put it: *let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.*