

Nation-Building, #5

My Country 'Tis of Thee

If I were younger, I would get out my guitar and invite you to join me in singing Woody Guthrie's joyful, patriotic song, *This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land, from California to the New York Island, from the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream water, this land was made for you and me.*

Hi, I'm David Rowe, co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, and you've entered the midst of my 14-part series on what the Bible teaches about nation, citizenship, and government. Woody Guthrie's classic and very visual ode to America is a good backdrop. We're taking a break from kings and rulers and that whole class of people who lord it over a nation. We gave one episode to King Solomon, who did it somewhat nicely and wisely. The last episode featured God's advice to steer clear of humans lording it over us and divine right kingsmanship and all those folks who want to be the boss of me and you.

Today, a change of pace. Let's look at America's favorite patriotic hymns. We sing them for July 4th and Veterans Day and Memorial Day worship services. We sing them at times of national crisis and sorrow. *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*, and *America the Beautiful*. And if you were a fan of the old Philadelphia Flyers hockey team and the New York Yankees' seventh-inning stretch tradition, you no doubt love *God Bless America*. There is an immediate uplift, a calming effect, a sort of controlled fervor with each song.

So it's worth asking, What is it that we're literally singing verse by verse, and what do they mean to us emotionally and spiritually? And let's open the door to the endless church and state debate. Obviously, if we sing patriotic hymns during church services, we have found at least a footbridge between church and state. America's church and state debate is too long-standing and too long-winded for me to resolve. Some of it is silly, some over-the-top, Some miss the point, some have a point.

For me, let me just say that the folks who got here by hook or by crook in those early founding and revolutionary days, by and large, were people of faith, who assumed that some sort of faith's guiding light would permeate the nation being built. Certainly the Old and New Testament scriptures did not imagine religion and nation like two boxes told to stay in their opposite corners, except when they duke it out until one defeats the other. It is safe to say that Americans have been cautious about the mix of church and state. Our founding ethos was forged by Congregationalists escaping Anglican persecution, Catholics fleeing Protestants' anti-Catholic bias, Baptists and Quakers escaping anti-Protestant and anti-individuality violence, Jews leaving behind centuries of old Europe's pogroms and inquisition. *Enough was enough*, they all no doubt exclaimed as they

packed up Bibles and Torahs and crucifixes and headed for places with hopeful names like New Canaan, Providence, Salem, Maryland, and Bethlehem. They weren't leaving religion behind. They were leaving behind religion that had been leveraged by force of tyranny against them. And I think we can grasp why the first 200 years of Africans on this land were not impressed by the governing religiosity that kept them in man-made hell by policy. Everyone had reason to be suspicious of too cozy a relationship between church and state. The overall attitude might express itself as, don't bother me with your religion.

That doesn't tell you not to have religion. It merely requests that one person not have the power to make another person's life miserable by the exercise of their religion. And yet, don't we want anyone in leadership to bring their A-game? Leaving religion aside, the Rotary Club has a superb four-way test for deciding what to say. Before speaking, a Rotarian should ask, Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary? Is it helpful? Now, assume a Rotarian is running for president, governor, mayor. Should we expect them to cast aside those Rotary Club core beliefs? Would we want someone who's a good Rotarian on Wednesdays but an SOB in the Congress or State House or the first selectman's seat or the Oval Office or in the pulpit? No. We want them to bring their A-game, their best. If your religion brings out your best, don't hide it, deny it, or forget it.

I once asked a highly successful businessman the key to his success. It has been success that fully intersects with government, business, politics, even faith. He told me it was the Boy Scouts, and becoming an Eagle Scout. The Boy Scouts clearly outline their stated beliefs, virtues, and expectations. Would we want a CEO, politician, or cabinet member who claimed Boy Scout roots to ignore those foundational seminal qualities while pursuing or being in a position of leadership? Of course not. A Rotarian as president and a Boy Scout-trained CEO can exercise their value-driven leadership without abridging my religious liberty.

Our patriotic hymns anticipate our best and by virtue of being hymns sung in church on Sundays celebrating patriotic holidays, these hymns neatly wed church and state. Today's title is drawn from *My Country, Tis of Thee*, which is musically drawn from *God Save the King*. "Long live our noble king, God save the king. Send him victorious, happy and glorious. Long to reign over us, God save the king." No pretense there of separation of church and state. Other verses are blunter, still, referencing politics and knavish trick, begging God's intervention.

My country, Tis of thee, is more subtle and universal, but the suggestion of God at work in the nation is strong. Following up on the first verse, the fourth verse links God, nation, and faith. We sing: *Our Father's God to thee, author of liberty, to thee we sing. Long may our land be bright, with freedom's holy light. Protect us by thy might, great God our King*. The British appeal to God is more blunt. America's more subtle. But both expect God to have our back. *Protect us by thy might*, we sing.

America the Beautiful has a different tone. Above all, it is a wonderful celebration of how fortunate we are to be here. It is a downright pretty song about a downright pretty America. We are left almost breathless by poetic imagery of purple mountains majesty, rocks and rills and templed hills, and amber waves of grain. It brings to mind my favorite childhood commercial, *See the USA in a Chevrolet*, accompanied by stirring scenes of grandeur. It made me beg my parents to buy a Chevrolet just so I could see the USA. The distinctive feature of *America the Beautiful* is three phrases tucked into the middle of the verses. Phrases like, *God shed thy grace on thee. May God thy gold refine. God mend thine every flaw.*

There is an unusual maturity and courage in those phrases. Theologically and practically, all three phrases anticipate an America that needs help, correction, forgiveness, fixing, cleansing. That takes guts. We are asking God on behalf of America for grace, refining, and mending. Everybody loves to sing *Amazing Grace*, perhaps overlooking that it comes for a wretch like me. It is in our wretchedness, our errors, that we need the grace, the unmerited forgiveness that we sing about in verse 1. Furthermore, the flaws of verse 2 require mending because something is torn, weak, at risk of falling apart, in need of repair to fulfill its function. And America's gold, in verse 3, needs refining because it has impurities. So it is melted down and purified. In the midst of this sweetest of patriotic hymns, we patriots are begging God to clean us up, fix us, forgive us, because we are in some ways impure, torn, sinful. Yes, that takes guts. It is courageous. It is mature. Now, I must note that hymns like these and other examples of calling upon God for our nation's benefit, they structure that symbiotic relationship as between God and nation. There is no mention of clergy, denomination, or a specific religion. So we go back to the beginning of today's episode. Our early Americans did not trust the fate of their nation to be in the hands of any specific religion. Call on God? Yes. Use every church, synagogue, and mosque to beseech God's help, guidance, and even intervention?

No, but don't designate favorite clergy and personal churches and popular religion to be the arbiter of all things sacred on the political and very public stage. To be blunt, I cannot think of a single situation in world history where a nation benefited from being led by religion, whether literally on the throne or more figuratively behind the throne. When church has sat in the state seat of power, the end result is not pretty. And whether the state silences religion or co-ops religion, the end result is equally not pretty. The plain truth is, America has been and is much blessed by religious practice, personal piety, faith-driven ethics, and spiritual good works. It is religious power that is a problem, and religious abuse is. And I guess we could combine them, religious abuse of power. What America needs is the best of our faith, the best qualities of our religion's heroes, the best teachings of our religion's holy books, the best examples of our religion's stories.

Which is where I'll close. Alida and I have often participated in the local Four Chaplains Remembrance Day, sponsored by the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign War posts in town. The Four Chaplains were on board the USS Dorchester in 1943 when it was sunk by a German submarine. Representing three religions, those Four Chaplains cared for the soldiers on board, they organized life-saving efforts, they gave up their own life preservers, and then linked their arms and died together praying. Was that church? Or state? Or both? Or four people bringing their A-game in a way that really is America the Beautiful?

Next episode, King Cyrus, Daniel, and us. Until then, God bless you.