

## “The Republic for Which It Stands”

**Deuteronomy 10:17-21**

**Mark 2:23-28**

In May of 2017, a 13-star American flag used in James Buchanan's 1856 presidential candidacy run set an auction record when it sold to a Pennsylvania antique business for \$275,000. It's not uncommon for historical U.S. flags to sell for more than \$20,000, particularly if they have fewer stars than the current version and are from the era before 1912 when the federal government standardized the design.

When it comes to putting a value on *old* Old Glories, it's actually better if the flags show age and usage, which makes flags an anomaly in the world of collectibles, where for most things, "mint condition" increases value. When it comes to flags, early vintage, faded colors and obvious wear and tear push the cost up.

Some interior designers make a point of using old flags to create a certain ambiance in a room. One man in that field, New York City-based Miles Redd, likes to use them because of their primary hues and because such flags are "incredibly distinguished and graphic."

But, of course, the U.S. Congress did not establish a flag for our nation as a boon for interior designers, but rather as an emblem of national identity. We recall this every time we say the Pledge of Allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands ..." In common speech, we often refer to our form of government as a democracy, but technically, it's a republic, which means it is a country governed by elected representatives. It's also a democracy, but not the kind where the citizens make the governing decisions directly; rather, it's an indirect democracy, where our elected representatives make the decisions, within the limits set by the Constitution.

All of this may be of some interest today being Independence Day, which celebrates our flag and the republic for which it stands. It's not a religious holiday, to be sure, but we church people, along with our fellow citizens, benefit from our nation's independence. So, on this Sunday, we have good reason to think about the things Independence Day represents and how they interact with our faith.

While we can gratefully acknowledge that many ideals of the Christian heritage informed the foundations of our country, there's always a danger in equating Christianity and our republic. They are not the same thing. And when we mush them together, some bad things can be done for political or national reasons under the name of God, which, in fact, God would not condone, let alone bless.

We should also remember that the political system under which Christianity was born was an imperial form of government with an all-powerful Caesar at its head. Further, many, if not most, of the world's Christians today live under other forms of government, many of which are repressive. More Christians, for example, worship on any given Sunday in China than in all of Europe.

Having said that, we can recognize that it is far easier -- and certainly less risky -- to be a Christian under our government which explicitly claims in principle to limit government interference in religion. Such limits might exist in a dictatorship (albeit depending upon the dictator's whims) or an oligarchy (depending again upon the whims of the ruling class) or a democracy (depending upon the whims of a majority) or even a republic (depending upon the whims of those elected or otherwise in charge).

And, of course, a theocracy by definition would impose its favored religion on the people. Our government declares it will "make no laws respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise" of religion.

So, it is right and proper that here in church, we should be thankful that we live in our republic, and we should pray for those Christians who face persecution under other kinds of government.

Let's also remember that our republic has done a great service for Christians. Our civil liberties, the Bill of Rights, the freedom of minorities, our right to dissent and even the separation of church and state, all contribute to an environment where it is safe and, in some cases, even popular to be Christians.

So well does our republic serve us in our faith, as well as in most parts of our lives, that we generally take it for granted. But today, let's think about the principles of our representative democracy that have Christian equivalents.

*The first is that representative democracy, like Christianity, puts values on individuals.* Abraham Lincoln called our system "a government of the people, by the people, for the people." Our government operates on the idea that an individual (who has sometimes been called "the smallest minority") should have an influential voice in *how* they are governed and *who* governs them. Thomas Jefferson wrote that, "The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government."

This matter of how persons are viewed is the primary difference between our constitutional republic and other forms of government. Although most governments -- including many dictatorships -- claim to exist for the good of "the people,"

the political philosophy founding our government says that the purpose of government is to secure the rights that God endowed to individuals. This is not a trivial difference, especially since words such as "democracy" and "the people" have widely differing and even contrary meanings at times (consider, for example, that North Korea's official name is "People's Democratic Republic of Korea").

Deuteronomy 10:17-21 speaks of God as one who values persons. God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, ... loves the stranger." And Jesus, speaking about the Sabbath rules, said, "People were not made for the good of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for the good of the people" (Mark 2:27, CEV).

In 2004, our Supreme Court ruled that the prisoners from Afghanistan and Iraq held at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay could not be held indefinitely without legal recourse. They must be allowed legal representation. Where individuals are valued, we cannot arbitrarily deny rights to some individuals.

*A second parallel is that both Christianity and representative democracies recognize a loyalty higher than to the state.* As people who are governed by laws and required to pay taxes, we might think that a republic tolerates no other loyalty but, in fact, it does. Our founders built in a system of checks and balances so that no part of the government should become too powerful. Under our Constitution, we are not voiceless slaves of our government, and while our system does not operate flawlessly, there is built-in tolerance for choices made by individual conscience, protected by our Bill of Rights and by the courts. Our government allows opposition parties. It protects free speech, even when such speech is critical of our government and its officials.

The New Testament advises followers of Jesus to be good citizens, but it reminds us that we are citizens of a higher world as well. The Christian who wrote the book of Hebrews talked about Old Testament people of faith who lived on promises of a homeland to come. They died, the writer said, without yet seeing it, but knowing they were "foreigners on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). They died, with the heavenly city ahead of them, which God had prepared for them.

In earthbound terms, this means that when our citizenship in God's kingdom tells us that something our government is doing is wrong, then that higher allegiance is our authority to speak up and act.

*A third parallel is that both our democracy and Christianity, when practiced rightly, care not only about the liberty of individuals, but also about their equality.* Equality as an ideal was stated boldly in our Declaration of Independence -- "All men are created equal" -- but it took three amendments to the Constitution (13, 15 and 19), as well as the Civil Rights Act, to extend that to all. Note that this means equality under the law: No one, by reason of ancestry or position, is to be considered better or worse than others. The law is to apply equally to all, without exceptions. In America today, equality still sometimes falls through the proverbial cracks, but the ideal is there in our system of government, and that is a big difference between a democracy and a dictatorship.

This egalitarian impulse is echoed in our faith. Consider the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, which reminds us that Jesus did not consider the rich of more worth than the poor. When Peter explained Christianity to the Gentiles gathered at the house of Cornelius, one of the things he said was that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34).

Here's a final parallel: *For Christianity and democracy to work, they both need responsible citizens.* The point should be obvious. But consider what happens to a republic when its citizens won't run for public office, won't vote, or are prevented from voting, won't work for the common good, duck paying taxes and mistreat others. Now consider what happens when Christians won't volunteer at the church, won't give to the church, won't practice their faith, won't love their neighbors.

Both our country and our faith need sincere practitioners. Nationally, we need a citizenry committed to making the ideals of liberty the practices of life in America. In order for the church to be faithful to its mission, followers of Jesus must be committed to making the ideals of the kingdom of God the practices of daily life.

This is not an either-or situation. Christians everywhere are citizens of two countries, one on earth and one in eternity. The sovereign realm of God is not yet fully come, but it's already in effect. Our two citizenships can neither be fully united nor fully separated. We cannot withdraw from the world and pretend we are somehow dwelling only in the commonwealth of God now; nor can we simply embrace the world and assume earthly governments fulfill God's will. Those are extremes, and they are unbiblical.

Some years ago, a pastor in Nepal was imprisoned for preaching the gospel in that predominantly Hindu nation. It was not a happy situation for him, but here's what he said about the Christians there: "Even though we are persecuted, we who are Christians pride ourselves on being the best citizens our king has. We try to be faithful to the fullest extent we can. We love our country -- but we love God more."

The kingdom of God and a democratic republic are not the same thing and should not be confused with each other.

But good governments impose a necessary structure on life and help to restrain evil practices. And our form of government, while far from perfect, provides a framework for a good life and the free practice of our faith.

There have been efforts every so often to remove the phrase "under God" from our Pledge of Allegiance. Many of us are glad those words are there. But when we say, "one nation under God," we should do so humbly, never implying that America is God's chosen country over all others. All people everywhere are invited to be in God's kingdom, but some governmental structures lend themselves to the free exercise of faith better than others.

Let us thank God for the republic in which we live and the flag for which it stands, and the freedom it makes possible. And let us strive to be good citizens of this country, knowing that as we work for the common good of all, we are being good citizens of God's kingdom as well.

May the peace of God . . .

#877 – Praise the Almighty