

The Cross and the Flag

A Reflection Featuring Matthew 16:24-26

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You and I live in a world teeming with symbols. Those of us who worship in a religious context *certainly* live within a world of symbols; for we Christians there is the symbol of a sacred feast set before us today, a steeple that rises over us, a cross adorning the building around us and a number of the items present in our worship. But even before we add in the substantial number of symbols from our religious tradition, we still live in a world absolutely bathed with them. We use symbols to maintain order on roadways, to signify places to go, to visually seal our commitment to certain relationships, to identify allegiance or belonging within organizations, to sell goods and services – to name a few. Symbols are powerful, we know, because they communicate so very much in an economy of space and time. One need not carry around a marriage certificate and have others read it when a ring on a particular finger suffices to get the message across.

While symbols carry a great deal of meaning, they do not carry all of their own meaning. This is a reality worth considering on this particular day – for all who pledge allegiance to the nation whose genesis is celebrated on this day, but especially for those who pledge allegiance to both this nation *and* to the Kingdom of God as illuminated by Jesus. That is, we Christians who are also citizens of the US do well to be aware that our substantial number of symbols do not exist in a vacuum; rather they radiate the light of meaning on one another collectively telling a story, collectively saying something that they don't on their own.

Think of it this way: Some time ago one of the most precious symbols to we the people of the United States appeared in the lawn of my next door neighbor – the stars and stripes, old glory, the red, white, and blue, the flag of the US. The sight of that one symbol communicates *so much* through felt senses – pride in the ideals professed to undergird a nation; gratitude for the privileges and comforts afforded by being in the land marked by it; a sense of belonging among the people for whom it stands; there is a whole founding history and mythology that might sort of flash before one's eyes at the mere sight of the flag. That one symbol communicates *SO* much and on that day there were *SO* many of that one symbol. In the strip of green space between my house and my neighbors' there were in fact 24 little flags waving in the breeze and another approximately 10 feet wide attached to the side of their garage with solar powered flood lights surrounding it.

According to what we've said about what the flag communicates as a symbol you would anticipate that on that morning I might be filled with a sense of camaraderie with my countrymen, with those who revere what that flag stands for as much as I do. If that symbol had no other context you might think I would experience those senses of gratitude and joy and hope and pride we spoke of a moment ago – if that symbol had no other context. What I actually felt that morning was a little hurt, but only vicariously. Also kind of angry. Worried. Maybe even a little fear. Now I know that it has become popular in our time and place to level accusations of unpatriotic, anti-american sentiments at those who find cause for criticism of the United States, and it is true that I am one such person; but no one with credibility could say that the flag of the country of my birth – on its own – conjures for me feelings of hurt, fear, anger. I appreciate the professed ideals behind the flag and love the people represented by the flag and am as loyal to the nation for which it stands as the next person. No, those

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

feelings, that deeply felt meaning wasn't communicated by the flag in a vacuum. They came from the flag *in its context*.

You see the day before those flags appeared Anna and I awoke to the latest expression of hatred in our world right in our neighborhood. In the night someone had spray painted generally racist and specifically anti-black graffiti all around the affordable housing complex just around the corner from our house. Aside from a reinforced commitment to being involved in the public life of our community to stand against these kinds of expressions of hate and their systemic counterparts, we felt compelled to *say* something too. We wanted to create a counter narrative in our neighborhood. On its own it's far from revolutionary, and literally the least we could do, but we made and posted in our yard a sign that reads, "Black Lives Matter."

Those who study the contexts of various messages might call this the *Sitz Im Leben*, the situation in life at the time of the arrival of those 25 flags. They arrived in such a time as to seem like a response to the sign we posted. They also arrived in a particular location. They were placed in the thin strip of grass between my house and theirs and nowhere else in the yard at all. The large flag was on the side of their garage, which is entirely unseen from the street in one direction, barely seen from the other, at the edge of their property where they would only venture to mow behind the garage, and immediately outside the full panel, glass door to our driveway. In short, the flags weren't posted for passersby to appreciate or for our neighbors to behold. They were posted for the only people who would regularly see them, us.

Do you see how the meaning of the symbol shifts when it is placed in context with another symbol? A flag which, on its own, we hope carries messages of liberty and justice for all; posted in response to a Black Lives Matter sign suggests a whole other intended meaning. A symbol of inclusion becomes a symbol of exclusion. The strange assumption that the opposite of Black Lives Matter is an American flag presumes and therefore communicates a great deal – namely that the messages communicated in the phrase are somehow unamerican. That in turn communicates a great deal about what it means to some to be American. You can see, I think, where my worry, fear, and even a bit of anger came from. Even so, this isn't really a story about me and my neighbors. It's a story about the way that symbols create a context for one another and shift each other's meanings when one is viewed through the lenses of another.

While there is plenty of fodder here for important discussions of all kinds, this seems to be a particularly important point for reflection this day on which the Lord's Day and Independence Day line up for Christians. Said another way, the fact that symbols interact with each other to create and communicate meanings they don't alone should be significant for those who are carrying the cross of Jesus and waving the flag of the United States. Understood in certain ways the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, though some might claim they are. But also contrary to what some others might say, the cross and the flag *certainly* are not unified in message.

While there are inspiring ideals to be hoped for and worked for embedded in the waving of the red, white, and blue we must profess that there are too some things communicated there that stand in contrast to the cross and all it signifies. The United States, we can hardly ignore, likes to be the biggest, best, grandest and most powerful – while the one who called us to bear the cross told us parables about flipping the Kingdom of the world upside down becoming vulnerable to serve the vulnerable, eschewing power in the name of love, seeking to be last and others first, giving up one's life in order to save it.

Our founding economy and therefore founding mythologies of the United States were based upon the exploitation of people; the one who first bore the cross we profess always sought to elevate others even at personal expense.

God's realm and our national realm do seem to share an appreciation for the freedom of people to be who they are created to be according to their own understanding. But in our world this freedom is upheld as an end in itself; a personal pursuit of gratification. God's Kingdom too is largely about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – just that of others before self.

There are so many points of contrast and comparison to pursue between the realm exemplified by the cross and that exemplified by the flag that it's almost reckless to have even opened this can of worms – almost.

My proposal for today though, is that we take these worms and go fishing – that we leave these moments of worship not having arrived at a singular conclusion, but rather seeking conclusions in the midst of our lives. Conclusions on what it means to be Christian? Sure. Conclusions on what it means to be a citizen of the US? Sure. But more so, conclusions on what it means to be both – on how the flag and the cross work together in the living of our lives to say a particular kind of thing. And perhaps most importantly, conclusions on whether in the living of our days, our flag gives meaning to the cross we carry or whether the cross we carry shifts the meaning of the flag we wave.

This is your invitation to further reflection, amen.