

True (and False) Patriotism

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, July 3rd, 2016

“And Solomon said... ‘Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?’” (1 Kings 3:7-9).

The word used here for an “understanding” heart comes from the Hebrew meaning “to listen.” And so it is that those in positions of authority (in government) have a responsibility to listen to the people’s needs and concerns. That they should also listen to instruction from the Word is a given if they wish to govern with true justice and judgment. But today we’re going to be focusing on our roles as patriotic citizens in the support of good government.

In the book, *True Christian Religion* we find the *love of the neighbor* explained in the context of an ever widening sphere of influence. First, of course, there is the individual. Then, we read, “Love towards the neighbor is a fuller love when it directed towards a society (a community) than when it is directed towards a single individual.” And “One’s country is the neighbor more than a society, because it consists of many societies....” But in every case the principle applies that “To love the neighbor, strictly speaking, is not to love the person, but *the good that is in the person*” (TCR 412, 414, 417). This is why, ultimately, the church, the kingdom of heaven and the Lord Himself are said to be our neighbors in the highest degrees. And this is why we have the well-known teaching that “Those who love their country and render it good service from goodwill, after death love the Lord’s kingdom, for this is now their country; and those who love His kingdom love the Lord because the Lord is the all in all of His kingdom” (TCR 414).

Just remember, it is *all* about the *good in* the person, the society, or the country. It is not about the person, the society or the country merely for its own sake, or for the sake of our selfish interests in it. The first of charity is to shun evils – including the evils of self-love – as sins against the Lord, and the second is to do what is good *for the neighbor* (TCR 435). So as we think this weekend about the real meaning of patriotism, let’s think about what it means to shun selfish evils that relate to our country, and let’s remember John Kennedy’s famous words, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

The Friendship of Love

In this connection there is a curious teaching – also in the *True Christian Religion* – about something called “the friendship of love.” In itself, as I understand it, this is or can be a good thing. Friendship joins people together on a relatively external level based on shared natural interests, whether for business or pleasure. But love joins people together on an internal level based on shared principles of deeper affection. So with a friendship of love you have a bridge that spans both realms, the internal and the external, joining people together in an almost unbreakable bond.

The problem with this is, as we read, that “The friendship of love contracted with a person *with*

out regard to his spiritual character is detrimental after death” (TCR 446). Why? – Because if we love someone without consideration for the good or evil in him we may bind ourselves (and *blind* ourselves) to that person’s evil. Then, if we cling to it because we love the person and don’t wish to make any judgments, his evil can become our evil, keeping us from heaven.

It is the same with the higher degrees of the neighbor, including the community in which we live AND our country. So if we love *what is good in our country* and do our best to serve that good we are on solid ground in our walk to heaven. But if we love our country *right or wrong*, then we are in quicksand when it comes to the heavenly kingdom, and we will get sucked in.

So how can you know if your country IS right or wrong on any given issue? And what can you do about it if you find something wrong? You might be surprised to know the answer – or one of the answers – that the Writings give, because the Writings are concerned primarily with spiritual things, not material things *except in so far as they relate to spiritual things* (DP 214), and so they are not nearly as concerned about the *decisions themselves* that people make as they are with the *reasons* we make them and the motives behind them. In the case of the friendship of love we read, “It may be objected that no one can know the interiors of the mind of those with whom he associates, or has dealings. *This knowledge, however, is not essential*; one must only guard against forming a friendship grounded in love with anyone *indiscriminately*. Mere external friendship, contracted for the sake of various uses, is not harmful” (TCR 449).

Further, in the general explanations about what constitutes true charity, we are specifically taught that “the distinctions in the neighbor, *which anyone who belongs to the church certainly ought to know*, depend upon the good present in each individual.” But then we read,

“There are never two whose goodness is exactly identical; it has to differ for each sort of goodness to continue in existence. But all these variations, and so all the distinctions in the neighbor, which depend upon the receiving of the Lord, that is, the receiving of good from Him, cannot be known by any person, not even by an angel, *except generally*, that is to say, by genus and species. *Nor does the Lord demand more from one who belongs to the church than to live in accordance with what he knows*” (NJHD 86).

What this means implies with respect to our country as our neighbor is that we are never going to know all the details or implications of government decisions. How *could* we, after all? Countless committees and task forces work behind the scenes to figure out what is best for the nation in a VERY complex global economic and political environment. We can only hope and pray that those who have the most influence have a high degree of integrity and wisdom from the Lord AND that we may see this clearly enough to know how to vote.

Still, a Bad Man Can Serve a Good Use

Thinking of what the doctrines say about friendship – plain old natural, external friendship – another complicating factor is the teaching that even a bad man can serve a good use to others, in spite of the fact that he himself is going to hell. Why? – Simple: from his pure love of self he will do whatever it takes to obtain the honor, reputation and material gain he seeks, and so we read “...why the Divine Providence permits the wicked at heart to be advanced to dignities and to acquire wealth.”

“The impious or wicked can perform uses equally with the pious or the good; *and, indeed, with greater zeal*, for they have regard to themselves in the uses, and they regard the honors as uses. Therefore, whatever the height to which the love of self mounts up, there burns within it the consuming desire of performing uses for the sake of its own glory. With the pious or good there is no such fire unless it is kindled from below by some feeling of honor. Therefore, the Lord governs the wicked at heart who are in positions of dignity by the reputation of their name, and moves them to perform uses to the community or country, society or city in which they dwell, and also to the fellow-citizen or neighbor with whom they associate. This is the Lord’s government, which is called the Divine Providence, with such; for the Lord’s kingdom is a kingdom of uses; and where there are but few who perform uses for the sake of uses He causes worshippers of self to be raised to the higher offices, in which everyone is moved to do good by means of his own love” (DP 250).

This explains – at least in part – the teaching in Luke 16:9 that we should “make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness...” Friendship, yes, if it can serve a use, but not love.

Complicated, isn’t it?

But just as it behooves the thoughtful Christian to examine well the quality of an individual’s life so that he can do what is best for him (NJHD 85), so it behooves all of us to examine to the best of our ability what is really good for the country. In this way we can to some extent avoid the unsavory and ultimately impossible job of trying to determine a leader’s true internal states (see CL 523), and we can instead contemplate the civil, social and economic needs of the country.

The General Good

To this end we have a wonderful set of teachings in the Doctrine of Charity about uses, beginning with the statement, “Everyone is born to perform uses.... In a well constituted commonwealth, therefore, provision is made that no one shall be useless. If anyone *is* useless he is driven to some work; even a beggar is, if he is healthy” (Ch 128). But the summary in this section is comprehensive. We read,

“The general good consists of these things: that in a society or kingdom there should be 1. What is Divine among them; 2. What is just among them; 3. What is moral among them; 4. Diligence, skill, and uprightness among them; 5. The necessities for life; 6. The necessities for all kinds of work; 7. The necessities for protection; 8. Sufficient wealth, because these three kinds of necessities are procured with it” (Ch 130).

Is it easy to figure all this out? No! That’s why we have so much disagreement among politicians – and among ourselves – about just how to achieve these results. But going back to the statements about what we can know, *the point is simply that we do discriminate*, that is, use good judgment based on the facts that we *can* gather. AND we need to listen to each other to GET the facts, or we will likely miss important information.

Of course a lot of people are wrong, basing their opinions on misinformation. We know that because we ourselves are often wrong. Still, listening to what others *think* is necessary, and especially *why* they think so, can lead us eventually to the truth, and a well informed decision.

The True Meaning of Discrimination: Wise Discernment

In this context we have another powerful set of teachings in the *Arcana Caelestia* where the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) is explained. Here we learn about how “the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison” represent 6 of the spiritual states of those to whom we are instructed to do good. And this, too, can be applied to the love and service we offer to our country. We read,

“The doctrinal [concepts] existing among the ancients taught all the genera and all the species of charity, and also who the neighbor is toward whom charity is to be exercised, and how one is the neighbor in a different degree and in a different respect from another, and consequently how the exercise of charity varies in its application toward different persons. *They also grouped the neighbor together into classes, and assigned them names, calling some the poor, needy, miserable, afflicted; some the blind, lame, halt, and also fatherless and widows; and others the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, bound, and so on; thus knowing what duty they owed toward one and toward another*” (AC 4955).

We can't get into the details here, but it is more than a little interesting that these names, which might otherwise be used in a derogatory way, were actually used to identify specific NEEDS so that some provision could be made for them – just as we use the term, handicapped, today, providing “handicapped accessible” facilities.

So when we see in our country what is *not* Divine, what is *not* just, what is *not* moral, or anything that does *not* encourage diligence, skill and uprightness in its citizens; when we see anything that *impedes* the necessities for life, employment or national defense, or corrupts the economy, then we have a responsibility to take action to correct those circumstances – not for our own sakes but for the sake of our fellow citizens, for that is what it means to love the neighbor.

Civil Disobedience

Finally, although we will end on a positive note, as you can see there is a place for civil disobedience. There is a higher Authority than that of the state. The problem, very obviously today, is that there are many among us – though maybe not the millions we first think – who vehemently disagree about who or what that Authority is, and what He – or It – requires of us. So in the end *civil* life requires that we build a foundation on the common ground of general principles such as those 8 necessities listed in the Doctrine of Charity. And where it seems clear to one individual or group that the majority are badly mistaken on some vital principle then in good conscience they must be free to protest and even disobey. But as great philosophers have argued since ancient times, if we flaunt the law we must be willing to accept the consequences *in this world*, and not just run away or commit suicide! Indeed, history shows that those who do this often produce a more lasting, powerful influence for change than those who duck and run. Consider the Lord's own life as the prime example, or in our own time people like Ruth Parks or Nelson Mandela.

In Conclusion

True patriotism is *not* “a love that asks no questions,” but a love that asks a *lot* of questions in the sincere endeavor to do what is good – to serve the good in others and to support what is good in every aspect of civil life. But again, how can we know what is good for the whole country? Indeed, how can we know the best way *our* country can be a good neighbor to all the others in this shrinking world of interconnected uses? Perhaps in the end it all comes down to Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings, chapter 3 where even though he had been appointed king of Israel he said,

“...but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart (a *listening* heart) to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil.”

To listen is to ask, and so when Solomon replied asking for a listening heart he committed himself to asking his own questions so that he could really hear the people’s concerns and their needs. In the same way, if we will also dedicate *ourselves* to asking the questions that will draw people out, and that will reveal their real needs, the Lord will be able to give us the guidance we need to serve them – and the country – well. Remember, ASK is also an acronym for the Lord’s famous saying, Ask, Seek and Knock, “For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8) so that we can serve the good in all levels of our neighbor, from the individual to the nation, and ultimately the Lord.

Amen.

Lessons: *1 Kings 3:5-15*
 Children’s talk on listening

Matthew 7:7-12
The New Jerusalem #86, 91 & 93

A Prayer for This Service

O Lord, our Heavenly Father, King of kings and Lord of lords, we pray this morning for the understanding heart that seeks only what is good in the service of our country – and our neighbors individually. Help us, we pray, to distinguish good and evil, first in ourselves and then in our civil and social lives, that we may serve the greater good to the very best of our ability – according to Your Word.

Teach us, Lord, and remind us to moderate our criticisms and most of all strive to work in positive ways for establishment of Your kingdom at all levels of our lives, that Your will may be done “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Amen.