

Turning Things Right Side Up

1 Peter 2:13-17
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What does Christianity have to do with the Fourth of July? Just this, and I quote: “The American flag stands for the fact that cloth can be very important. You can tell just how important this cloth is because when you compare it to people, it gets much better treatment.

Nobody cares if a homeless person touches the ground. A homeless person can lie all over the ground all night long without anyone picking him up, folding him neatly and sheltering him from the rain. School children have to pledge loyalty to this piece of cloth every morning. No one has to pledge loyalty to justice and equality and human decency. ... But we all have to promise to love a rectangle of red, white and blue cloth.”

That’s from 6th grader Charlotte Aldebron, in an essay she wrote for her school in small-town Maine.¹

What Charlotte doesn’t know is that the American flag is more than a piece of cloth. It’s a symbol, a symbol of a nation that does care about the homeless, and about justice, equality and human decency. We care deeply about all this and more, even as we know we could do so much better.

How do we as a country make headway with the problem of homelessness, justice, equality and human decency? It’s not an easy question in a democracy like ours.

Moral behaviors and ethical values can’t be legislated; they can’t come from the government. They must come from somewhere else – from the family, from the church, from civic organizations committed to creating, maintaining and building up the nation – family-by-family and community-by-community.

This interplay between values and actions, between people and government is exactly what First Peter is talking about in today’s New Testament lesson.

¹ Cunningham Middle School, Presque Isle, Maine. archive.commondreams.org. Retrieved January 9, 2018.

First Peter was written to the early Christians at the dawn of the 2nd century, at a time when people were struggling to keep the teachings and Spirit of Jesus alive amid the social and political turmoil all around them, including the torture and execution of Christians by the emperor himself.

Oddly enough, First Peter tells them, “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.”

Here, we see a connection between the government and God, between being a good citizen and being a good Christian, and, by extension, a connection between the American flag and the moral values it represents.

Our country today, our families today, our communities today are in desperate need of making that connection between government and God, citizenship and church-life, our flag and our moral values.

Ask yourself, is what you hear coming from our elected officials a representation of who you are as a child of God? Is the noise and clamor of your household a reflection of the grace and peace of the Lord? Do the churches, shops and services of our communities truly meet the needs of all the people who live there?

Those are tough questions. They are so interrelated. The words and actions of our government officials set the tone and budgets of our community services. And our community services, in turn, impact the welfare of our families and households.

The struggles we face as a nation – in living up to the ideals of that flag – come from one source and one source only – the relationship between our government, our communities and our families. Our government today seems to exist for its own sake and not the sake of the people it serves, and this has a negative impact on our communities and our families. It’s upside down!

No one would permit me to go over to that flag and hang it upside down. And yet, according to the United States Flag Code, an upside-down flag is a signal of dire distress, used at times of extreme danger. In that context, maybe the flag should be flown upside down in this country, and here’s why I say that.

I would never fly the flag upside down – I see that as disrespectful to all it stands for. I would never hang the flag upside down, but I am concerned that the values it symbolizes have been turned upside down. And maybe you feel that way, too, looking at what America has become in relation to our faith in God and the teachings of Jesus.

Take for example, the time a state trooper pulled over a guy for going too slow on the freeway and having too many flags on his car. As soon as the officer walked to the car the questioning began: “Who are you? What is your name? Do you speak English? You look illegal to me; are you legal? Where did you come from?” “Ok, first of all, my name is Officer Gonzales and I am supposed to be asking the questions.” It’s upside-down- the relationship between government officials and citizens.

A representative democracy like ours is supposed to be colorblind, respecting and valuing all people regardless of our differences. As Abraham Lincoln said, ours is “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.” Or, as First Peter says, “... It is God’s will that by doing right, you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.”

By doing right as citizens of America and children of God, it is our civic duty and Christian calling to make sure this country isn’t run by a bunch of foolish people making foolish laws for foolish – and selfish – purposes.

Our government is supposed to ensure that each and every person has an equal voice in how they are governed. I’m not sure that’s always the case. I’m not sure that other factors – such as money and dirty politics – aren’t given a greater voice, a greater influence over government than the individuals it’s supposed to serve. If I’m right about that, it’s upside down. Your voice and your moral convictions should speak louder than the mighty dollar. And that’s just not always the case.

A second connection between Christianity and our representative democracy – in addition to valuing the individual over the institution – is a loyalty to something higher than the state, higher than any office of government. The founders of this country built in a system of checks and balances so that no one office of government would become too powerful. Each branch of government has the freedom and power to check and balance the other.

Or as First Peter says, We – “as servants of God – live as free people, yet (we are not to) use (our) freedom as a pretext for evil,” as an opportunity to rig the system in our favor. And yet, that’s just what the different branches of government have become – places of power that people use to rig the system in their favor. It’s upside down!

Finally, a third connection between Christianity and our form of government is that they both rely on people taking active interest in what’s happening, and what’s to come. Just imagine what our government would be like if the most responsible, well-intended citizens didn’t want to run for office. Oh, wait. Most of them don’t. Politics has become so cut-throat that it’s hard to find decent, moral people to serve, and too often, those good people who do want to serve don’t stand a chance. It’s upside down.

What would happen if our church were that way, if decent, moral people declined to serve – as officers and committee members, as teachers and small-group leaders, as pastors and staff? We wouldn’t have a church, would we? And then where would this country be? It takes each and every one of us doing our part as individuals for this church to do God’s work on behalf of our families, our communities and our nation. Now, that’s right side up.

Just like our government works best when we the people – on the grassroots level – do what it takes to elect and support active, principled servant leaders, so our churches work best with your active, faithful participation in the life of the congregation. And not only do our churches thrive, but then they can better support and nurture our families, who can then better support and nurture our communities, which can then better guide and direct our government. That’s right side up.

When First Peter says, “Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor,” it’s saying to us, “Don’t let things get upside down and out of whack.” Look, it’s simple. When God and your church family are at the center of your life, the people and institutions around you will better reflect the morals and values of our faith.

Remember that as you gather with family and friends today to celebrate the birth of this nation – remember to make God a part of your celebration. And then, when the holiday is over and you’re getting back to normal, remember to make God a part of your everyday life – the center of your everyday life – so that you and I and all people can work together to build up our families, our communities, and our nation in keeping with the spirit and principles on which it was founded. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace and glory, as we celebrate the birth of our nation, it is with grateful hearts that we remember our ancestors.

We give thanks for all the people who have fought for and defended our freedom throughout the years.

We remember, as well, those who were harmed in the establishment of this country. We ask your guidance as we continue to learn how to live together as a nation made up of people of many different nationalities.

We are blessed with an amazing variety of geography across our land, the awesome redwoods, our coastlines, vast plains, majestic mountains and deserts.

Help us protect each of these different environments so the generations to come can enjoy their beauty.

Help us not take our freedom for granted – remembering that there are still too many people throughout the world who don't share the luxuries of freedom we consider basic rights, such as free speech and religion.

May we ever remember, also, our most precious freedom: "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (Romans 8:21)

Lord, we pray your Spirit of freedom and peace for those who feel held back by illness and disease, pain and suffering, especially all those we've kept in prayer these many months.

We pray all this in the name of the one who came to set us free, Jesus the Christ. It is in his name that we lift our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**