

“What Does Christian Patriotism Look Like?” August 16, 2026
Matthew 22:34-40 Westminster, Greenville
12th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr

On Saturday, June 6th of this summer, our family was on vacation, and the four of us decided to go to a movie together.

The movie was “Pressure.”

Did anyone else see that film this summer?

It’s about the role that WEATHER and METEOROLOGISTS played on D-Day, 82 years ago...

Fascinating film.

The movie opens with a scene of a number of U.S. soldiers who have been killed on the beach. But it’s not D-Day at that point...it’s a scene depicting events that took place 6 weeks before D-Day, and I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that I didn’t even know this event occurred until I saw the film.

The event was called “Exercise Tiger.”

It was a dress-rehearsal for the D-Day invasion, only it went horribly wrong, and at least 750 American soldiers lost their lives in that dress rehearsal.

Whenever I think of D-Day, I think of the movie “Saving Private Ryan,” I think of one of my former parishioners, at another church, who was a part of the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944...

But until I saw that film, I had never known about those soldiers who died in “Exercise Tiger.”

I was grateful, and moved, to learn about them.

Because, if I can put it like this, their UNSEEN SACRIFICE has something to do, I think, with our topic for today.

Have any of you spent any time this year, as we celebrated the 250th birthday of this country, thinking about what loving our country means to you?

It's certainly a relevant topic for our Westminster congregation.

In our church, we have any number of members who have served faithfully in our country's military—in Vietnam, in Iraq, here at home and abroad. And we have members who have served in federal government and state government and local government positions, working hard, in their political or judicial roles, to better the lives of our community and country.

But patriotism isn't limited to particular people.
Love for one's country can be lived out by all people.

And how we faithfully love our country—
is a question that I believe Christ asks each of us
to consider.

How does our Christian faith shape the ways in which we practice patriotism and faithful citizenship?

The Presbyterian pastor Tom Are once put it like this:

America is a nation we love, but America is not a given. This experiment in democracy is kept alive by citizens who devote themselves to the common good. Elections tempt us to ask, “What is good for me?” but a mature patriotism...asks, “What is good for us all?”¹

I completely agree.

The first thing that Christian patriotism means is working for the COMMON GOOD.

Do you remember the words we heard from Micah this morning?

“...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore...”

It’s a prophetic vision of the COMMON GOOD.
Not just for one nation, but for all nations.

Some of you may recall that we hear these words from Micah every year.

They are read each Advent.
When we’re lighting one of the Advent candles.
And we always stop at verse 3.

What I didn’t know until recently is that the very next verse, verse 4, was George Washington’s favorite verse in all of scripture. He cited it frequently and it helped ground his own faith.

Taken together, verses 3-4 go like this:

¹ Tom Are, Jr., “A Mature Patriotism,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, July 7, 2024.

“...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore;

but they shall all sit under their own vines
and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid...”

It was this verse that he quoted from when he wrote to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790, assuring them that their new country would be a place that “gives to bigotry no sanction, and to persecution no assistance.”

“May [you] who dwell in this land,” Washington wrote to that synagogue, “continue to...enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants...while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”²

That verse from Micah provided the vision for the religious liberty that was at the heart of our nation’s founding, and it’s why, in our own day, Christian patriotism means rejecting Christian nationalism.

In a recent piece for *Christianity Today*, the professor Paul Miller puts it like this:

“Patriotism is the love of country. It is different from nationalism, which is an argument about *how to define* our country...”

“As Christians, [patriotism]...means working to improve our country by holding it up for critique and working for justice when it errs.

² Jon Meacham, “American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation,” New York: Random House, 2006.

On the other hand, “Christian nationalism is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way.”

“Christian nationalism tends to treat other Americans as second-class citizens.”³

So...what does Christian patriotism look like?

For starters, it looks like a vision in which no one in our country—Christian or Jew, agnostic or atheist, LGBTQ, Black, brown, or white—should be made to live their lives in fear.

It means working for the common good to make this vision a reality.

But if I can expand a bit on what Tom Are suggested, patriotism for those of us in church is not only about the common good.

I think it also has something to do with courage.

Do any of you remember the name Fannie Lou Hamer?

Born in 1917, Fannie Lou Hamer was the daughter of sharecroppers, raised in poverty in the state of Mississippi.

One day in the summer of 1962, Hamer attended a mass meeting about voter registration efforts. She decided to join the Civil Rights movement, to help with voter registration, and in June of 1963, Hamer and several fellow activists were arrested after stopping at a Mississippi diner during a voter-registration trip.

³ Paul D. Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism?”, *Christianity Today*, February 3, 2021.

They had not violated any laws, but they were still thrown in the Winona jail, where Ms. Hamer was beaten nearly to death—leaving her with injuries and a limp that lasted the rest of her life.

What was her response to this horrific series of events?

After being released from that jail cell, Ms. Hamer remarked:

‘It wouldn’t solve any problem for me to hate...just because they hate me. Oh, there’s so much hate, only God has kept [me] sane.’

That sanity led her to continue her work with voter registration after she was released from jail. When Ms. Hamer started her efforts in 1962, in her home county, Sunflower County, Mississippi—fewer than 1% of Black residents there were registered to vote...

by 1968, that number had increased to 42%.⁴

I don’t know about you, but that sounds like patriotism
Christian patriotism, to me!

This past June, the Pew Research Center reported that in a survey of over 10,000 Americans, the “two-party system has basically split into nine groups, ranging from the ‘unconventional right’ to the ‘left-out-left’ to the ‘tuned-out-middle.’

It’s being called—not polarization.
But the atomization of America.
And it’s having affects on how we see our neighbors.

Not just how we see them.

⁴ Charles Marsh, “God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights,” Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

But LITERALLY seeing them.

As the sociologist Robert Putnam—
 who published *Bowling Alone* 26 years ago—
 as Putnam put it in a recent interview:

“What matters most is face-to-face connection...
 And that has...
 never been as low in American history
 as it is right now.”⁵

I wonder if it’s the Church’s job to try to change that.

Your very own church, this very day, is offering you an
 opportunity to change that.

You can serve:

As a volunteer tutor for Pleasant Valley after school;
 As a volunteer at Project Host, providing meals for our
 neighbors experiencing food insecurity...

You can take part in our Day of Service on August 29.

I said a moment ago that Christian patriotism requires courage. It
 doesn’t even have to be Fannie Lou Hamer’s courage, or the courage of
 the soldiers who gave their lives in Operation Tiger.

It can simply be the courage to increase your face-to-face
 connections with your neighbors you don’t know these days...neighbors
 who are struggling, who are in need...

⁵ Jesse McKinley, “America is Atomizing,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2026.

It's why I chose our text from Matthew as our second text today.
Do you remember our second text?

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

“[Jesus] said to him, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

According to Jesus, the way we love God is by loving our neighbor. Show of hands, how many of you agree with Jesus?

Good.

This church isn't polarized or atomized.

Everybody here agrees with Jesus!

It took a bit of courage to raise your hand right there.

Do you have the courage these days to do more than raise your hand for Jesus?

While you're considering that question, let's review:
Two ways to think about Christian patriotism.

Working for the common good.

Stepping forward with courage.

#3) And here's a third:

recognizing our COMMON NEED.

When Jesus told us to love our neighbor, he wasn't just saying that we needed to do so for our neighbor's sake, although that is certainly true.

He was telling us that we need to do it for our own sake.
Let me get at this in a roundabout way.

I know you've been missing hearing stories about our dog...

So, about a month ago, my wife and I were out walking our dog and on the other side of our block, there's a neighbor who owns two dogs.

Now these two dogs and our dog DO NOT like each other.
No idea why.

But on both sides, whenever they see each other—even from a distance—they just bark like crazy, like they want to attack each other.

It's so bad that whenever I would see our neighbors coming with their dogs, I would always turn and go the other way—and they would do the same thing.

Well, Heather and I were walking Pepper around the block when we went by our neighbor's house—and...it just so happened that our neighbor was coming out with his dogs.

Unfortunate timing.
And the barking commenced.

But just as I was trying to turn around with Pepper, somehow—
much to our surprise and horror—
she managed to break off her leash.

For a moment, she looked like—wait, I don't have a leash?
And then she **SPRINTED** toward those two dogs.

Thankfully, our neighbor calmly squatted down and started talking to his dogs, holding tightly onto their leashes, but Pepper started circling them, and it looked like they were getting into a fight, and I chased after her...running in circles as she ran around them...I don't how long it lasted, maybe 30 seconds, maybe a minute...but Heather and I finally caught her.

We apologized profusely to our neighbor.

We bought a new leash, new collar for Pepper.

And we decided never to walk with Pepper on that side of the block again.

Not too long thereafter, I took Pepper to doggy day care while our housecleaners came to clean the house. And I asked the people who work at doggy day care, uh...how has Pepper been?

Any problems with her recently?

Oh no, they said.

She's terrific.

She's a sweetheart.

We love having Pepper here.

I was glad...but utterly mystified.

Who knows how she makes her decisions.

It's like there's an instinct in her that says: I don't like these dogs on my block, but the dogs at doggie day care are GOOD!

Because when she's at doggy day care, for whatever reason, she's the best version of herself. It's like she knows she needs those other dogs in her life to truly be herself.

All of which got me thinking.

Do we know how much we need each other, to become the best version of ourselves?

Do we know how much we need the child who causes problems in the classroom, as much as the child who get straight A's?

Do we know how much we need the person who doesn't vote the way we do, as much as our friends who see the world the way we do?

Do we know we need the immigrant and the refugee as much as we need the person who has the Mayflower in their family tree?

Do we know how much we need the family who struggles to stay in a home, as much as we need the family that lives in a million-dollar home?

You see, unlike my dog, we don't have to act on instinct.

We have the freedom in this country, to decide how we practice our faith. And we can decide how our faith will shape the way we love our country.

It's a marvelous gift.
And it's a sacred responsibility.

What do you think?

In this semi-quincentennial year, what can you and I do...to help ensure that not just some neighbors, but every neighbor, gets to sit under their own vine, their own fig tree, and NEVER...be afraid?

Amen.