

## The Spiritual Practice OF Patriotism

July 5, 2020

Matthew 22:1-14

*God invites people to the feast, but some say "No: I have better things to do! Who needs God anyway? God always has room at the table for people who think they don't belong there. Some folks don't take Gods invitation seriously, and they miss out on all the goodness there is to eat and drink in! On this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, what does it mean to engage the Spiritual Practice of Patriotism? Hear how the Spirit is inviting us in Matthew 's Gospel, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Chapter, to say "Yes!" to God.*

*Jesus responded by telling still more stories. "God's kingdom," he said, "is like a king who threw a wedding banquet for his son. He sent out servants to call in all the invited guests. And they wouldn't come!"*

*"He sent out another round of servants, instructing them to tell the guests, 'Look, everything is on the table, the prime rib is ready for carving. Come to the feast! '"*

*"They only shrugged their shoulders and went off, one to weed his garden, another to work in his shop. The rest, with nothing better to do, beat up on the messengers and then killed them. The king was outraged and sent his soldiers to destroy those thugs and level their city."*

*"Then he told his servants, 'We have a wedding banquet all prepared but no guests. The ones I invited weren't up to it. Go out into the busiest intersections in town and invite anyone you find to the banquet. ' The servants went out on the streets and rounded up everyone they laid eyes on, good and bad, regardless. And so, the banquet was on—every place filled."*

*"When the king entered and looked over the scene, he spotted a man who wasn't properly dressed. He said to him, 'Friend, how dare you come in here looking like that!' The man was speechless. Then the king told his servants, 'Get him out of here—fast. Tie him up and ship him to hell. And make sure he doesn't get back in."*

*"That's what I mean when I say, 'Many get invited; only a few make it.'"*

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

On July 4<sup>th</sup> of the Bicentennial, 1976, I flew to Boston for the festivities. Our United Airlines pilot took us the long way around Boston Harbor, circling twice so we could all see the 16 Tall Ships in port that had made their way from New York to Boston that year for the big celebration. All faces were glued to the airplane's little windows. I remember people moving out of the way so others could share the experience.

Once we landed, my then boyfriend and I took the "T" to the Charles River to get a good seat on the grass, for Arthur Fiedler and his Boston Pops were going to play the "1812 Overture." Huge canons were set up across the river that were fired off toward the end of the musical piece as an extravagant fireworks show simultaneously lit up the Boston sky. Who could keep from feeling patriotic that night?

Fast forward 44 years (that's not possible, is it?) to this weekend, July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, 2020. I didn't feel very celebratory; I didn't even want to go watch fireworks, because I didn't want to be around people or noise. I was worried about our dog, my Big Boy who shook like a leaf and ran to his crate every time he heard a boom or a crackle.

No BBQ with friends and family, no Rockies baseball, no dancing in the park across from our home with neighbors—not this year. My television is blowing up with coronavirus news of upticks throughout the country and all over the world. The election news is depressing and somewhat frightening.

I'm wondering if I will have to stand in line with a bunch of other people to vote or if, like 2016, my absentee ballot will even be counted before winners are announced. Protests continue on with grace and dignity but also with ugliness and danger. Our own Metro area is once again the center of negative attention over the death of a young man of African descent whose story never was made public until George Floyd and stories of similar police abuses.

I just don't feel like going out to the curb with my mini-flag and waving it at passersby. We made a difficult decision recently, for now, not to fly our Blue Line flag in support of law enforcement. For now is just not the right time. How can we feel patriotic in times like these?

I have a suggestion: Watch the film, ***Richard Jewell***." If you've already watched it, watch it again.

Richard Jewell died in 2007 at the tender age of 44, but before that, even in the face of the worst our justice system is capable of acting, Richard never lost his patriotism. He was scorned and falsely accused of setting a pipe bomb on July 27th in Atlanta's Centennial Park during the 1996 Summer Olympics.

In actuality, he saved countless lives that night from death or catastrophic injury. He was employed as a security guard and stationed near the concert stage sound tower. He spotted a suspicious backpack and set in motion an evacuation of the immediate area, including the concert camera and sound crew from the tower. The bomb exploded before the police bomb squad could disarm or remove it. Two people died and more than 100 others were injured.

The FBI soon focused on Richard Jewell as the lone wolf suspect after a former employer of his called in a tip and portrayed him as an ultra-wannabe cop with a "zealot's heart." The FBI and The Atlanta Journal Constitution

newspaper made his and his mother's lives a nonstop nightmare, the FBI executing successive and intrusive search warrants of their home and the media holding them under siege for weeks and months.

Through it all, Richard Jewell maintained his composure and his love of country. He always wanted to be a bona fide police officer, but he had some negative prior job performance reviews and could not quite get there. When he was hired as security guard for the Atlanta Olympics, he asked for support from his mother, asking her, "It's still law enforcement, isn't it?" She answered, "You're still the good guy warding off the bad guys... The world owes us both better. Son. This is what we got. Go do your job."

He did his job and he was a true hero for doing so, but the justice and media systems got him all wrong. Nevertheless, throughout his ordeal as an accused domestic Terrorist, Richard continually defended the FBI—even their unfair and deceptive interrogation tactics, saying to his lawyer, "They're just doing their job." The investigating agents laughed at him and the media fileted him, and yet he still believed in law and order, he loved his country and he wanted Tom Brokaw to again speak well of him on the nightly news. He lived the Spiritual Discipline of Patriotism.

I selected the scripture reading today to illustrate a point about God and God's invitation into relationship. As you recall, the king was going to hold a great wedding banquet for his son. He invited all the best people, but they all declined, making up excuses for not coming. The king Then sent his servants out to round up anyone on the streets who wanted to enjoy the feast.

This is a good God story to this point. We easily connect this message. When God issues the invitation, you should come. Don't make excuses and don't

delay. Matthew in this parable is castigating the religious elites and wealthy people who have forgotten how magnanimous God is. This makes way for the true believers in God, those without wealth or religious purity or full bellies. They are invited into the Lord's house and they don't hesitate to line up for the banquet.

"The first shall be last and the last first." Jesus has first stated this just a few clicks earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter. Now he tells three parables in a row to confirm it. This is a theology that makes no sense to the Pharisees, for in their self-review, they have been pious and righteous before the Lord God and eternal reward should be theirs.

They wrongly believe God acts on a reward system for ritually pure behavior. To the contrary, Jesus sets no litmus test for the invitation to God's feast other than to answer it and come to the table prepared to be fed and changed.

This is the last lesson of the reading. It is not enough for us to be in need of the nourishment God can provide. We must also dress the part. Not with the clothes we wear, but by our all-in attitude, by taking the invitation seriously, not just showing up, but showing up dressed for the sumptuous meal God is serving us.



Mrs. Jones got a little too used to watching online worship from home.

I love this cartoon. We all can relate. Let's not show up to God's dinner party looking like what the cat just drug in. Reverence still has its place in religion. As Richard Jewell said more than once, "I still believe in law and order."

We often equate patriotism with freedom. Lately, that word "freedom" has been used as a weapon to justify behavior that is free, but it is neither wise nor loving. In his letter to the Galatian church, the Apostle Paul spoke to the lawlessness of freedom, the misinterpretation of Christ's gift given to us through his life and message of hope. The church guard was intimidating new believers to live a life not free, but rather according to religious rules and

regulations. Paul believed that in Christ, "God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within" [Eugene Peterson, "Galatians" in

The Message]. He wrote:

It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows.

Being a patriot in these times means just that, I Think. It means living your life in ways that serve others in love.

It's not about waving a flag, but it is about listening to your grandparent tell you again about their war experience.

It's not about having or missing a barbeque this weekend, but it is about filling up your grocery car} with food for homeless persons.

It's not about claiming you're not a racist and getting offended at the Black Lives Matter movement, but it is about studying your whiteness with other people, going out of your way to make persons of color feel safe and welcome around you, and changing systems in which you have influence, starting with your own household and family;

It's not about wearing a face mask because somebody tells you to do so, but it is about wearing it and keeping your distance in public because, as Mark Twain said, : "You're never wrong to do the right thing." It is a Spiritual Practice of Patriotism to protect other people with your own actions.

It's not about being right in your politics, but it is about exercising your voice with your vote, not by being disgusted and staying away from the ballot box on Election Day.

Peggy Campbell sent me this on Thursday and I thought I would share it with you this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. It's a quote by Leslie Dwight, an American man of African descent:

What if 2020 isn't cancelled?

What if 2020 is the year we've been waiting for?

A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so scary, so raw-that it finally forces us to grow.

A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us from our ignorant slumber. A year we finally accept the need for change.

Declare change, Work for change, Become the change.

A year we finally band together, instead of pushing each other further apart. 2020 isn't cancelled, but rather the most important year of all.

This is a spot-on description of Patriotism for this year of our Lord 2020. It's a good message to cut out and paste on your refrigerator or mirror so that you can consult it often.

This afternoon, I'm going to go watch my favorite July 4<sup>th</sup> film, "Independence Day." It's an old (1996) sci-fi film about aliens preparing to invade the Earth and how the peoples of the Earth come together to fight against their annihilation. President Thomas J. Whitmore addresses all the nations of the world as they prepare to engage in the final struggle for the planet, calling them all to come together as one people, full of purpose, ready and dressed for the banquet and the battle.

I give thanks for all of you who served -or currently serve (Ani) our country in the military and in law enforcement. It is because of your sacrifices that we can use our freedom in Christ today, in these



troubled times, to serve one another in love. Maybe it is a great day to be a Patriot. hear the dinner bell ringing. Better get dressed. PJS off! Pre-March 15 clothes on!

*May It Be So.*

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