

“The American Contradiction”

Romans 13: 1-7

“...for there is no authority except from God...”

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It was in the basement of my family’s house, under my mom’s laundry counter, that I discovered a dusty old box that held my father’s collection of country and western albums. They all came from a very specific era - late 50’s to early 60’s - a time when my dad was in the Marine Corps and had the time and money to plunk down some of his hard earned pay to pick up the latest releases from the base’s KP. There were albums from Hank Snow, Lefty Frizzell, Buck Owens, and of course, the Man in Black, Johnny Cash. A lot of the albums were worn and had odd scratches on them, but when I put them on the turntable and the music rolled out, I fell in love with the sounds of a uniquely American art form.

I was but a boy of 12 or 13 years when I first got turned on to “old-school” country music and I have remained a fan all my life as I’m sure many of you have figured that out given my warbling from the pulpit. In college I had the only country music show on our campus’ radio station, a show I called “Both Kinds of Music: Country and Western.” I have seen live performances by legends like Bill Monroe and Willie Nelson and have continued to collect old albums from back in the day, that now, in the age of digital music, take up residence in my basement. There is just something in country music that is real, honest, and true. It is American music.

But like America, country music is filled with contradictions. There are songs that speak to rugged individualism as well as those that speak of blessed community. There is respect for tradition alongside the onward march of progress. There is holiness and hedonism, best expressed by the duality of songs for Saturday night and songs for Sunday morning. Author Rodney Clapp, brings these contradictions to the fore in his recent book, Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction: Christianity and the

Soul of the Nation. I heard about this book and decided that any offering that explored country music and Christianity was must read material for the Reverend J. William Coulter.

In the book, Mr. Clapp looks at all the ways that our country and country music are at odds with themselves, in tension, with oppositional forces. Using the lens of country music he explores how America can be a place of great virtue, the shining beacon on the hill as well as a nation fallen far from grace, prone to bouts of racism, greed and violence. But the contradiction that most attracted my attention concerned the intersection of faith and patriotism. To put it cleanly, could a person be both a faithful Christian and a loyal American? That is my subject for today.

In certain parts of Christian America, the question as to whether a person can be a faithful Christian and a loyal America is nonsensical. For them America is the new Israel, God's blessed nation, the one that stands apart from the others, the chosen people. And while there are many people who take up residence in the United States of America, the true Americans are those persons who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. One only need recall all the furor that surrounded the question of President Barack Obama's faith during last year's presidential campaign to be reminded why this is such an important question. I received countless emails that suggested that he was in fact a Muslim and not a Christian, as if being a non-Christian disqualifies someone from office. The implication being that to be a true American, one had to be a Christian, and if you were a Christian, one had to support America, in all of its endeavors, wars or otherwise. For if you believe some of the language coming from Christians in the post September 11 world, God has a unique relationship with America. God is on our side.

Well, an examination of Christian history and the scriptures tells us that it wasn't always so. From the moment Christ ascended to heaven and his story began to be told by his followers, there has been an uneasy relationship between the faith and those authorities that governed the faithful. Jesus lived and died in the midst of empire and

while he was critical of the authorities of his time his focus was on God's Kingdom and not Caesar's. In the letters of Paul, including the selection from Romans that we read this morning, we are advised to submit rather than rebel against governing authorities, and pay our taxes, but reserve respect and honor for the one who holds all true authority, that being our God in heaven. Indeed the story of the early church is a story of their uneasy and often oppressive relationship with Rome and for that reason they sought not conflation with government but separation.

Now Constantine ended that distinction when he converted to Christianity and made the church the religious organ for the new *Holy* Roman Empire in the year 313; and many would point to that moment in history when the real problems in the church began. Today there are Christian movements like the Amish and some Quakers who pledge no loyalty to governments, only to Christ. In some churches you will see no American flag and I have known more than a few pastors who are uncomfortable with overt displays of patriotism in worship that celebrate a country in ways that may seem idolatrous. To be Christian and American should invoke some level of unease, some thoughtful questioning of how we order our loyalties. And so we return to my central question, the American contradiction, how can a person be a faithful Christian and a loyal American?

The Rev. William Sloan Coffin, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City and prominent preacher for social justice offers a most useful formulation for resolving this question. He uses the language of patriotism and talks in terms of different kinds of patriots. He said,

There are three kinds of patriots, two bad and one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world.¹

¹ William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), p. 84.

There is great wisdom in that, don't you think? To illustrate this quote I can't help but bring it all back to country music. Rev. Coffin talks about the uncritical lovers of America and here I am thinking of Lee Greenwood's song "God Bless the USA." Now I've got no problem with the sentiments expressed in the song, America is a beautiful place and I too am grateful for our freedom and for those who fought to protect it. However the suggestion that God should bless the United States before all others is a problem. This song has been used by those "uncritical lovers" as a tool to celebrate the United States unconditionally and in its jingoistic worst to attack persons critical of U.S. foreign policy with the old red, white and blue. God Bless the USA indeed, but also Sri Lanka, and Colombia, the Czech Republic and yes, Iran and Iraq. God's blessing for our nation does not remove the need to question our government's policies from time to time.

The other questionable kind of patriot that Coffin identifies are the loveless critics, and in the world of country music, the pickings here are kind of slim. I guess we could point to the Dixie Chicks but I only know that they withhold their love for George W. Bush not an entire nation. No, this kind of response is most common on the American left and it was heard loud and long during the Presidency of the Bush Administration. These are the people for whom America can do no right, who only wish to list America's sins and ignore its virtues. They are the loveless critics.

So Rev. William Sloan Coffin points us in the direction of the lover's quarrel and advises us to stay in relationship with our country but not to be blind to its wrongdoing, just as God stays in relationship with us despite our own missteps. And the country music figure that best epitomizes this right-minded approach is none other than the man suggested as the fifth face on Mount Rushmore, Johnny Cash.

Johnny Cash was a serviceman, a southerner, and an undisputed patriot who loved his country. But he never let his love for the good old U.S. of A. obscure his concern for the ways that our nation failed its most vulnerable citizens. In his song, "Man in Black" Johnny sings,

*I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down,
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime,
But is there because he's a victim of the times.*

*I wear it for the sick and lonely old,
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold,
I wear the black in mournin' for the lives that could have been,
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men.*

*And, I wear it for the thousands who have died,
Believen' that the Lord was on their side,
I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died,
Believen' that we all were on their side.*

*Well, there's things that never will be right I know,
And things need changin' everywhere you go,
But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right,
You'll never see me wear a suit of white.*

*Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day,
And tell the world that everything's OK,
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back,
'Till things are brighter, I'm the Man In Black.*

Johnny Cash carried on a lover's quarrel with his country until the day that he died. He was a Christian and an American and proud to be both. So on this 4th of July weekend as we fly the Star Spangled Banner maybe we ought to do so with a nod to the Man in Black and celebrate our country in all its fullness of contradictions, good and bad, this land that I love, God Bless and God Help, America. Amen.