

Often when I visit new churches, I like to play the game of ‘which of these things does not belong?’ For example, at the Divinity School chapel, each of the hanging lamps has an golden eagle suspended from a chain just above the lampshade. Though eagles are slightly obscure symbols for God, this bronze flock always made me feel uncomfortable. On another occasion, I visited a Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC that had six enormous wooden crosses hung on the wall behind the altar. There seemed to be no reason for that specific number of crosses, and so it seemed that the cross had become more of a decorative motif for these Presbyterians rather than a powerful Christian symbol.

But the one thing that never fails to give me pause in church is the presence of the American flag. At Saint Timothy’s, we display the American flag next to the Missouri flag and the Episcopal shield, lower than the cross and certainly not central to the space, but present nonetheless. A little history on the flag in church: while some Roman Catholic churches began to display American flags in the 1800s as a sign of allegiance to the American government, rather than only to the pope in Rome, the majority of American churches began to display flags just before WWII at the urging of Franklin Roosevelt. This mix of patriotism and faith felt right to many in a time when the country was at war, while so many churches were praying for victory and peace.

Since World War II, however, displaying the flag in church has become a subject of intense debate for many Christians.

Some argue that the flag should be taken down, out of the worship space altogether. While some simply believe that the flag has no place in a space dedicated to the worship of God alone, others see the flag as a symbol of a country which some say often stands against Christian principles: a country that enslaved hundreds of thousands of people; a country that fights wars overseas in which innocent civilians die; a country in which one group or another always seems to be on the bottom of the social pile, in need of jobs or homes or health care.

**On the other hand, many people proudly display the flag as the symbol of a nation which allows free worship to any religious group. We sit in this church without fear of our government; our right to assemble as Christians is guaranteed by our Constitution. The flag is a symbol of a government that sends millions of dollars in aid to poor countries, a government that has worked hard to bring peace and freedom to places like Southern Sudan. This same government at its best works hard to represent and advocate for people like us.**

**And so the flag is a controversial thing, because as Christians, our relationship to the government is a very complicated one. Over this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, I have been giving a lot of thought about my dual citizenship, so to speak, as Christian and American: which comes first? Can I really be both, and stand fully for the ideals represented by our country and those taught by Jesus? Can I follow Jesus and still salute the flag? What is my duty to my country as a Christian?**

**And so it seems right, somehow, that as we struggle with these questions, we read about the anointing of David, who was to become king of a nation that worshiped and feared Yahweh, the God of Israel. This was a man who struggled with his relationship to God and country, and to his fellow human beings.**

**Described as “ruddy, handsome, with beautiful eyes,” David ascended quickly to power in Israel through his military prowess. First defeating Goliath, then killing a hundred Philistines in order to become the son-in-law of King Saul, David impressed all whom he met. David became close friends with Jonathan, Saul’s son. When King Saul finally dies after pursuing David out of murderous jealousy, David mourns Saul before becoming king himself. As king, it is said that David built up Jerusalem, “growing greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.”**

**This David: strong, handsome, successful: this is the David that many remember. King David, founder of Jerusalem and protector of the nation of Israel.**

**This week, however, it took the disgraced governor of South Carolina, Mark Sanford, to remind me of the David many of us tend to forget. For those of you who have managed to avoid the media circus surrounding Sanford, he is the governor who famously disappeared for seven days last week. While his staff claimed that he was hiking the Appalachian Trail, Sanford was actually AWOL in Argentina with his lover. As a married father of four sons, Sanford shocked the nation by revealing that he had found his soulmate in South America, but was planning to remain governor nonetheless. In his speech that was not quite apology, not quite justification, the evangelical Sanford appealed to King David's legacy as one argument for why the State of South Carolina should take him back.**

**King David's \*legacy\* would be more than enough to fill a tabloid. While he is fleeing from King Saul, David lies to a priest of Israel and steals holy bread; the priests of Israel are then murdered because of their complicity with David. After David becomes king, he seduces Abigail, the wife of another man, to become her husband. Then, he seduces Bathsheba, and has her husband killed in battle. David becomes estranged from his son Absalom when Absalom kills his brother for taking advantage of his sister; finally, Absalom is killed in battle when he tries to take the throne from his father David. All of this on top of the tens of thousands of human beings David is said to have killed in battle.**

**So this is the legacy of David: a man, a great leader, an anointed king of Israel, who is nonetheless deeply flawed. What saves David, and preserves his reputation as one of God's anointed kings, is that David is forever in relationship with God, despite his overwhelming shortcomings. In the books of Samuel, we see David time and again fall to his knees after one personal tragedy or another, seeking guidance, professing repentance, and praying for forgiveness. This David, this is the man with**

whom we can identify – not the glorious king with unlimited success, but rather the man on his knees seeking forgiveness.

The distance between God’s vision for us, and the reality of our existence, is something that I spoke of a few weeks ago. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, speaks of this same distance within himself: hear his words again: “The Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” The same power that fills Paul’s weakness, is the power that works in King David. God is exalted in his power to forgive David; God is made glorious in his ability to transform Paul into a leader of the church.

Like the great King David, our great nation is a complex being. When I look on our flag, I can’t help but think of the McCarthy trials alongside of the free press; of Jim Crow laws right next to our nation’s first black President; of the ongoing deaths of innocent civilians overseas alongside the sacrifices of so many American soldiers. While I am sure that God is made glorious in the successes of our nation, I am still left unsatisfied in how to relate as a Christian to our nation’s current shortcomings.

Luckily, there is one character whose story is not yet told, who is often left out of the story of King David. Nathan, a prophet in Israel, continually called King David to take a look at himself; to see what he had done; and to turn and repent. Nathan time and again helped David face reality, and then helped him to turn and seek the glory of God. With Nathan’s guidance, David was able to become a great king by admitting his weaknesses, and looking to God to fill them. Because of Nathan, David never forgot that he was the servant of God, and that his glory came from God’s power alone.

That is how I see us, as Christians, in relation to our country: we are Nathan, helping David to see his own need for God. We are prophets, calling attention to weakness while preaching God’s great love and potential. As Christians, we are

**without fear in pointing to the areas in which our country needs to do better. We are without fear because we know that our mandate to stand on the side of the poor and the oppressed comes from Jesus Christ, who calls us and our nation to be transformed in God's vision.**

**And so, for me, the flag continues to hang in the sanctuary not as an object of worship, but rather as a reminder of our great duty as Christians to be prophets for our nation. On this July 4<sup>th</sup>, may we give thanks for the work which God has done in and through our country, and may we never forget our duty to call ourselves and our nation into God's even greater vision. Amen.**