

Why I Honor the Flag of a Sinful Nation

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By Lenny Cacchio

LEE'S SUMMIT, Mo.—Nobody is saying that my country is righteous. The 325 million of us are often a sorry lot. We have been throughout our history.

Its people massacred this continent's native peoples by the tens of thousands.

For centuries they enslaved a race made in God's image.

They marched us into wars for land and for gold. They invaded Canada (1812), they invaded Mexico (1846), and fabricated a war with Spain (1898). We have been complicit in the toppling of foreign governments with the result often being worse than the original rulers (examples: Iran in 1978, Libya in 2011).

Put bluntly, the sinful nation symbolized by the flag I honor has acted little differently from any other great power in history.

So why do I honor the flag of a nation full of sinners? Maybe the same reason why I attend a church full of sinners. To look for perfection in the world of the human race is to court frustration.

In Jesus' day, He lived among a people who had ridden off the rails. Their religious leaders were more interested in their traditions than they were in the welfare of the people. They had forgotten that the law of God was not about rules to keep, but about people to love.

The entire 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel, especially beginning in verse 13, is devoted to Jesus excoriating the religious leaders of the day and ends with Jesus lamenting the city and people He loved in spite of their sins.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

This was the cry of a patriot who loved His people in spite of their sins, a lamentation that they refused to turn back to the ancient paths set forth by their founders. Indeed, they were like sheep without a shepherd, not terribly unlike the world we inhabit.

That's why I honor the flag of a nation of sinners. I love the people of this country, and I respect the ideals upon which it was founded—even though the reality has never matched the ideal.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Beautiful words that have been honored in the breach, and, while we have never quite reached the full measure of the power of our ideals, the aspiration has been there from the beginning and has been a touchstone to which we have tried to return, through trials and triumphs, from the days of the first settlements in Massachusetts.

I honor the flag of this nation of sinners because, although we are imperfect, we are a work in process even though our aspirations are greater than actuality. Consider the dream envisioned in the last verse of the national hymn, "America the Beautiful":

O Beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam,
Undimmed by human tears!

America! America! God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Or consider the words Bruce Feiler penned just a few years ago in his book *What Will I Tell My Children About the Meaning Of Moses?*

First, the power of story. Exodus opens with a memorable statement: A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. The story begins with forgetting. The Pharaoh does not remember how a son of Israel saved Egypt from famine.

The rest of the Five Books of Moses become an antidote to this state of forgetfulness. God hears the groaning of Israel and remembers His covenant (Exodus 2:24). Moses leads the Israelites from Egypt and urges them to remember this day (Exodus 13:3). The Israelites are ordered to remember the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8) and to observe Passover as a day of remembrance (Exodus 12:14).

Moses' goal is to build a counter-Egypt. He must construct a society that offers an alternative to ignorance and unknowingness. He must devise a community that remembers.

I will tell my daughters that this is the meaning of the Moses story and why it has reverberated through the American story. America, it has been said, is a synonym for human possibility. I dream for you, girls, the privilege of that possibility.

Imagine your own Promised Land, perform your own liberation, plunge into the waters, persevere through the dryness, and don't be surprised or saddened if you're stopped just short of your dream.

Because the ultimate lesson of Moses' life is that the dream does not die with the dreamer, the journey does not end on the mountaintop, and the true destination in a narrative of hope is not this year at all. But next. Remember that the accomplishment is often in the striving.