

We all have multiple identities, multiple ways we identify ourselves, multiple things we identify with. For example, in no particular order, these are some of the things that identify me:

I have ancestors that came predominantly from Ireland, and England, and Germany, along with a smattering of other places.

I graduated from Texas Tech University, so I root for the Red Raiders.

I am a citizen of the United States of America.

I've lived most of my life in Texas.

My father's family comes from the Pittsburgh area—that's why I root for the Steelers, and the Pirates, and the Penguins.

I'm a baptized Christian, and a life-long Episcopalian.

My parents have divorced and remarried, so I have a wide variety of siblings: two brothers, a half-sister, two step-brothers and two step-sisters, and two ex-step-sisters.

We all have multiple identities, and multiple ways we identify ourselves and things we identify with.

And usually, we're pretty good about ranking them, knowing which identities are more important than others. That's not always a conscious choice. But we tend to do it pretty naturally.

For example, amongst my numerous siblings, two went to Texas Tech as I did, three went to the University of Texas, and one went to Texas A&M. We tease each other about those things. We sometimes gloat after a sports victory. But those differences don't stop us from being family. I don't say, "Since I'm a Red Raider and you're a Longhorn we're no longer part of the same family." No. We know that family is more important than which school you attended or root for.

Or for another example, I value and treasure my Irish heritage. But my primary national allegiance is to the United States of America. I trot out the Irish side by putting on green to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. But my American citizenship is far more important than my Irish ancestry.

Like I said, we're usually pretty good about sorting such matters out. But occasionally they tangle us up. And they usually tangle us up at the top end of the pecking order.

Today is the 4th Sunday of Epiphany. At the beginning of our service, we prayed the Collect of the Day. These are the words I prayed, and these are the words you agreed to if you joined in by saying, Amen:

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Do we really believe what we said? "God, you govern all things..."

If so, that means out of all our identities and things we identify with, there is one thing that is primary, one thing that is paramount. That means God has to come first, before everything else. If we have been baptized, if we have proclaimed that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is our King, that means no one else is.

That means our identity as Christians comes before any other identity. And the one that's most likely to trip us up is national identity. My identity as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ means that my citizenship in any earthly country has to be secondary. Jesus is Lord. First. Foremost. Full stop.

Now, I'm proud to be an American. I still pledge allegiance to the flag and to the republic for which it stands. But that is secondary allegiance. That pledge even says it. One nation, UNDER God. In other words, God comes first.

We have an American flag here in our church. But it is not the central symbol. The Cross of Jesus Christ is primary. The flag is secondary. The Lamb of God always takes precedence over the American Eagle. And the American Eagle takes precedence over any Republican Elephant or Democratic Donkey or any other lesser identity.

Things seemed to shift about 30 years ago at the end of the Cold War. I remember growing up that political differences were always taken seriously. But they didn't seem to be as divisive as they are now.

But it seems something shifted after the end of the Cold War. The Berlin Wall came down. The Soviet Union collapsed. The enemy that we most feared while I was growing up was no longer a threat to our existence. And it seems in the 30 years since then, we've started to replace that external threat with internal divisions. It's become sharper and sharper over these past few decades. The rhetoric has become more and more heated. And there's more and more talk on both sides that if the other side gets elected, it's the end of American civilization as we know it. That's dangerous.

We don't do this at lower levels. Red Raiders and Longhorns take their rivalry seriously. But two years ago, when Tech made it into the final four there was a wonderful ad taken out by UT that said,

"Orange and Red are in the same family. The University of Texas System Board of Regents and the entire UT system congratulate Texas Tech for making it to the Final Four. Go Red Raiders! Bring it home to Texas!"

Likewise, we have to remember that red and blue are part of the same American flag. We may have serious and important philosophical and political differences that we need to debate. But we are one nation. And we are one nation under God. For people of faith, our national identity is never our ultimate identity.

That's what we prayed earlier. "God, you govern all things...". God, you are ultimately in charge. Jesus is Lord. The Lamb of God always takes precedence over the American Eagle. And the American Eagle takes precedence over any Republican Elephant or Democratic Donkey or any other lesser identity.

Almost 1,600 years ago, the 2nd most important theologian and writer in the history of Christianity was writing his Magnum Opus.

St. Augustine of Hippo is the second most important thinker in the history of the Christian church, second only to St. Paul in importance.

And in the 420's he wrote his massive and hugely important book, *The City of God*.

Augustine was responding to trauma in his society. Things were changing. The Roman Empire wasn't as important as it used to be. In fact, for 3 days in August in the year 410, barbarians overran the city of Rome and pillaged a city that hadn't been conquered in over 1,000 years. And the Romans were still reeling from the shock.

But Augustine drew on 2 images and contrasted them. The idea of Christians being citizens of an earthly city, versus being citizens of the City of God, God's heavenly city.

For now, we carry dual citizenship. Christians are part of the earthly city. But their primary allegiance is to the City of God.

That doesn't mean we don't care about the earthly city. Augustine says that it's very important to work for the good of any city or community or nation where God has placed you. And he also says it's important to join with pagans, with non-Christians in seeking the common good of the earthly city together.

After all, Augustine reminds us, when the Jewish people were defeated, and Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were carried off as exiles to live in the foreign capital of Babylon, God spoke to them. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God commanded them,

"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."¹

So if the Jews were called by God to seek the welfare of an enemy city where God had decreed they would dwell in exile, how much more should all of us seek the welfare of the earthly cities God has placed us in?

¹ Jer 29:7

And yet, Augustine also said that true and perfect peace would never be found in any earthly city, or country, or empire. Only the City of God, only God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven would bring ultimate peace.

So pray for our beloved country. Pray for our leaders. Work for the good of the United States of America. But always remember that God is ultimately in charge, and we are citizens of his kingdom first and foremost.

As we prayed earlier, "God, you govern all things..."

But then we added something else. And it's a good prayer for us too.

"God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace."

God. Hear our prayers. You're in charge of all things. But hear our prayers. And in our time grant us your peace.

In this earthly city, we are called to spread God's peace and share God's love as best we can. But ultimately, it doesn't come from our efforts. It comes only as a gift from God. In our time, God, grant us your peace. And we have to trust God to do just that.

As our choir just sang

"Through the thick darkness thy kingdom is hastening:
Thou wilt give peace in thy time, O Lord."