

HEARTBEATS - Staying Connected

7/5/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, July 6 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who serve or who have served in the military. Give thanks to God for the service of these individuals to protect our rights, including the right to worship. Pray for their safety and the protection of our country. Ask God to show us how best to care for those who struggle as a result of their time in military service.

There is something on the campus of St. Andrew that always strikes me as, well, odd. It just doesn't seem quite right. It's the flags on the flag pole near the three-cross tower. And what seems odd to me is that the American flag flies above the Christian flag. Indeed, this is the correct order for flying flags in our country. The American flag is always given prominence. But it just feels strange on the campus of a Christian church to see anything given higher priority than the Christian flag.

Now I do need to say that technically there is no such thing as a Christian flag. What we call the Christian flag was originally conceived by Charles Overton, the superintendent of a Sunday school in Brooklyn, NY in 1897 as an activity for the students. He thought about this a lot, and by 1907, Overton and Ralph Diffendorfer, the secretary of the Methodists Young People's Missionary Movement, settled on the current design and began promoting it. The Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) adopted the flag in 1942.

But for we who are Christian, the flag—the real flag—is the cross of Christ itself. Like the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” says, “with the cross of Jesus, going on before.” For centuries, Christians have raised the cross of Christ and followed behind it in processions for celebrations and rites of the church. We don't need a flag. We have the cross. Nevertheless, the flag came into prominent usage in Lutheran churches during World War II

when, particularly German Lutheran congregations in the United States began displaying the American flag in their worship centers so that all would know that their loyalty was not to Germany, but to the US. (I know a congregation of predominantly German Lutherans who opted, rather than to adopt the name Grace Lutheran Church for their congregation when they formed in 1941, to instead be American Lutheran Church for that perception of patriotism.) Once the American flag came into the worship spaces, the Christian flag was soon added to create balance with the American flag.

We are Christians and we are Americans. We are blessed to live in a country that states freedom to worship as one of our foundations. There are many throughout the world who risk much to gather to worship and to live out their faith. Yet the American flag above the Christian flag leads me to wonder which of the two has the higher priority for those who come to worship at St. Andrew. Is our loyalty first to our country or to our God. Fortunately, we don't often have to make such a choice. Still, there are times where the teachings of scripture may come into conflict with the policies and practices of our country. Where then do we make our stand?

I realize that now, when you come to St. Andrew and see those flags, you may find yourself asking that same question. Does Christ have the highest place in my life? If push came to shove, would I put God ahead of country? You may not look at that flag pole the same way again. But maybe that's a good thing.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey